

**Pedagogy for the Privileged:
Religious Education Practices for Border-crossing and Conversion**

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Presented to
the Faculty of the
Claremont School of Theology**

**In Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy**

**By
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ABSTRACT

This dissertation seeks to identify clues toward pedagogies of religious education/spiritual formation that can participate in transforming the dehumanizing practices of entitlement and domination associated with privilege. It identifies the nature of privilege as a *habitus* – an undetectable, socially-reproduced norm – and as an aspect of *identity* – a core aspect of the internalized ego.

It argues that the cultivation of a border-crossing identity has the potential to be a space of transformation for privileged persons, where a resistance to the socialization and internalization of identities of privilege can begin. The works of those who reflect identities as “border-crossers” – Gloria Anzaldúa, Jung Young Lee, and Virgilio Elizondo – are reviewed to elucidate an model of border-crossing identity.

Because of the multiple barriers that often prohibit sustained change, the radical change associated with religious conversion can partner with educational models of consciousness-raising to assist in this re-crafting of identity. Practical theological models of conversion in the works of James Fowler, Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, and Kathleen Talvacchia are drawn upon to understand how ongoing practices of conversion can be a resource for transforming identities of privilege.

This project includes a qualitative, narrative-based study of eleven religious workers who are in positions of race- and/or class-based privilege relative to those they minister with. These are people who reflect a commitment to dismantling their own preoccupations with and practices of privilege, toward the development of identities that cross borders of culture and class. This study seeks to understand the socialization practices that contributed to these persons’ identities of privilege, to elucidate how these

persons have disrupted the dominant socialization practices that contribute to their privileged identities, to describe their self-understandings as border-crossers, and to identify the ways that these people have undertaken this transformation of identity as an act of conversion. The conclusion of this study seeks to identify clues toward religious educational pedagogies of conversion that might facilitate the transformation of identities of privilege toward identities of border-crossing, in the pursuit of power-sharing praxis.

Dedicated to my father,

Jerald Carter Walker,

who taught me how to cross borders with much care and good humor.

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Introduction

The Problem of Privilege

Privilege is the result of a system of social practices that awards unearned advantages to those who represent and identify with dominant groups. In the U.S., people in these groups—including men, the middle- and upper-classes, whites, Christians, U.S. citizens, heterosexuals, and the able-bodied—can express entitlement and domination simply by belonging to and identifying with these groups. Most significantly, these populations “have the power to increase the social burden on other groups.”¹ That the privileged do not name these inequities and share power with those who have been systematically denied power is a significant injustice that dehumanizes both the privileged and the oppressed. While those of us who hold significant privilege did not create this system, we nevertheless hold power in and benefit from this system, and we are called to justice in addressing it.

Privilege is produced by social institutions as an undetectable norm that designates particular resources and services as the sole property of an elite minority. Individuals who are a part of elite groups are taught by social institutions to participate in the reproduction of privilege and to see the entitlements associated with privilege as normative. Because we are rewarded for our participation in this system, we internalize this socialization as part of our identity, a fundamental aspect of who we are.

Because privilege is not just a part of our social practices, but also a piece of our identities, there are significant barriers to transformation. Our compulsion to seek our own comfort via practices of entitlement and domination means that while we might

¹ Mary Elizabeth Hobgood, *Dismantling Privilege: An Ethics of Accountability* (Cleveland, OH: The Pilgrim Press, 2000), 3.

intellectually recognize the harms associated with privilege, our efforts toward significant change are often not sustained. Many helpful educational models intended to transform privilege and oppression approach this problem by helping persons to “unlearn” privilege intellectually. These models build important skills for critical thinking that are necessary for shifting our understanding of how the world works and what is considered normative, or “just the way things are.” But cognitive discomfort is not our only challenge in transforming privilege. Our emotional, relational, and spiritual comforts are also challenged, often shaking our core foundations of emotional wellbeing, our relationships and significant networks of belonging, and our sense of what is ultimately true and trustworthy. Often, our educational models do not address these dimensions of our identity construction as people with privilege, and many barriers remain to sustained change.

Our educational models need to develop a new vision for transformation of identities of privilege that includes, but moves beyond, a sole focus on the cognitive elements of such a change. Educational models that support persons of privilege becoming skilled cultural border crossers must take seriously the need for building the skills of critical thinking and must also address the affective, relational, and spiritual changes that occur in the process of transformation. Religious education and spiritual formation that address these multiple dimensions of identity formation – cognitive, affective, relational, and spiritual – can assist in leading to such a conversion.

Border-crossing and Conversion

The cultivation of a border-crossing identity has the potential to be a space of transformation for privileged persons, where a resistance to this socialization process and

the re-crafting of the identity of privilege can begin. Cultural border-crossers are persons whose identities are oriented on the borders of two or more cultures, who resist the core dualism of oppressor/oppressed and the way this dualism contributes to the dynamic of privilege and oppression. As a result, border-crossers express *both/and identities*, both taking responsibility for the ways privilege operates in their identities and practices, *and* also being able to identify with experiences of oppression. As a result of this both/and identification, cultural border-crossers are multi-vocal, with the ability to speak from and relate within multiple languages codes and sources of meaning. They are able to tolerate high levels of ambiguity and contradiction, which is essential for challenging the normativity associated with the dynamic of privilege and oppression. And, perhaps most importantly, they are able to identify dominating practices in their own behavior and in social dynamics, and to construct a third way of being and relating that transcends their identification with privilege alone.

The challenge that we have, as people who reflect identities of privilege, is that we have been socialized to see the world through only the dominant lens, despite the possibility of multiple ways of being. How, then, can people of privilege be socialized to cultivate the ability to recognize privilege, to resist dominant socialization patterns, to make explicit choices to de-center themselves and face the many discomforts associated with true change, given the many barriers to such change? I suggest that the radical change associated with religious conversion is a potential means of crafting border-crossing identities for people with privilege, and that the resources of religious education and spiritual formation that draw from the religious practice of conversion can contribute to such change. Building upon an understanding of privilege as a socialized habitus that

operates and is expressed at the level of identity—leading to practices of entitlement and domination that perpetuate the dynamic of privilege and oppression—I argue that privilege is also a meaning system in which persons place ultimate trust, or *faith*. In this sense, practices of entitlement and domination are expressions of faith in the normativity and ultimate truth of privilege. Building upon this understanding of privilege as something in which we invest faith, I offer conversion as a re-orientation of that in which one places ultimate trust as a starting point for exploring the ways in which religious educational models of conversion can contribute to turning away from the sins of entitlement and domination associated with privilege, toward the forgiveness, grace, and shalom that are part of resisting domination and expressing solidarity with the oppressed.

Contribution to the Field

There are a number of scholars and practitioners whom I join as conversation partners in this work. I orient the work of these people in three categories: 1) multicultural religious educators, 2) writers on pastoral leadership and congregational development, and 3) educators addressing issues of privilege in contexts of theological education.

First, are those considered multicultural religious educators, whose works have provided the foundations for my interest in and concern with issues of privilege in multicultural contexts. The most prominent writers in this category are the two mentioned significantly in this study—Elizabeth Conde-Frazier² and Kathleen

² Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, “From Hospitality to Shalom,” in Conde-Frazier, Kang, and Parrett, *A Many Colored Kingdom: Multicultural Dynamics for Spiritual Formation*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004); and Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, “Prejudice and Conversion,” in Conde-Frazier, Kang, and Parrett, *A Many Colored Kingdom: Multicultural Dynamics for Spiritual Formation*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004).

Talvacchia.³ The works of these two scholars address multicultural education in religious contexts in broad ways. That is to say, they explain the spiritual and religious value of multicultural encounter in educational contexts and/or on the part of the religious/theological educator and provide pedagogical resources for facilitation such encounters. Both Conde-Frazier and Talvacchia point to the importance of understanding ongoing multicultural encounter as a process of spiritual conversion for persons engaged in the pursuit of multicultural solidarity. While Talvacchia does address the social location of the theological educator as part of the dynamic of the multicultural learning environment, neither writer explicitly addresses the problem of privilege in contexts of multicultural learning.

The second category of works that have contributed to the development of this study is works on multicultural and border-crossing pastoral leadership and congregational development. I identify three writers who factor prominently into this category. First, Eric H. F. Law is a prolific writer on the development of leadership in multicultural contexts. Much like Conde-Frazier and Talvacchia, Law is concerned with the value of multicultural encounter in religious communities.⁴ His work contributes in important ways to enhancing the ways we understand the role of power as capital and how we understand power to function in contexts of multicultural encounter. Law claims that one's social location and cultural background contributes to one's "perception of power."⁵ He names the importance of developing capacities among religious leaders for becoming aware how persons from multiple cultural locations in an educational context

³ Kathleen Talvacchia, *Critical Minds and Discerning Hearts: A Spirituality of Multicultural Teaching* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003).

⁴ Eric H.F. Law, *The Wolf Shall Dwell with the Lamb: A Spirituality for Leadership in a Multicultural Community* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 1993).

⁵ Law, 29.

context perceive their own power, and offers resources for developing a self-understanding of one's own perception of power along with how to identify and educate amongst the operation of power in multicultural religious communities.⁶

Jacqueline J. Lewis and Gary Commins write about the development of border-crossing pastoral leadership. Lewis draws from the stories of five clergy who exemplify border-crossing leadership in multicultural congregations, seeking to understand how these persons' border-crossing identities were crafted in such a way that allows them particular effectiveness in bringing together different cultural groups in multicultural congregations.⁷ She states that identities are formed by stories shaped in specific contexts,⁸ and claims that by understanding the stories of these five border-crossing clergy, we can come to craft "prophetic preaching, purposeful teaching, leadership development, and planning" that can "sustain multiracial and multicultural congregations."⁹ Likewise, Gary Commins writes about the importance of becoming "bridge people" as congregational leaders, expressing a "capacity for openness, respect, empathy, and compassion" that enlivens the "spirit of diversity" in religious communities.¹⁰ This text gives particular exercises for understanding the construction of one's cultural background and how this contributes to identity construction, as well as ways to cultivate "crossing over" to experience, appreciate, and express the mores of other cultural groups. Both texts are important resources for developing an

⁶ Law, 31.

⁷ Jacqueline J. Lewis, *The Power of Stories: A Guide for Leading Multiracial and Multicultural Congregations* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2008).

⁸ Lewis, 5.

⁹ Lewis, 4.

¹⁰ Gary Commins, *Becoming Bridges: The Spirit and Practice of Diversity* (Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 2007), 7-8.

understanding of how one's social location operates at the level of identity, and by offering models for facilitating practices of border-crossing.

Finally, two writers—Katherine Turpin and Sheryl Kujawa-Holbrook—specifically address the operation of privilege in contexts of theological education. Turpin writes about expressions of privilege as barriers to learning in the context of justice and peace education.¹¹ She writes specifically that the feelings of shame and guilt associated with revelations of privilege in contexts of peace education provide particular barriers to student motivation for learning, identifying pedagogical responses to these barriers to increase motivation for learning. Kujawa-Holbrook writes about the development of cultural competence as a means of addressing white privilege in theological educational contexts. As a piece of developing cultural competence, Kujawa-Holbrook names a four-stage pedagogical process aimed toward developing awareness of white privilege and white racism amongst European-American students. The goal of this process is the eradication of white racism via change in the self-understandings and practices of white privilege amongst theological students.¹²

My project intends to marry the best of the work that my colleagues have developed on privilege, conversion, and border-crossing. It adds nuance to our understandings of conversion in multicultural contexts by grounding new insights in the conversion experiences of people with privilege, and extends the conversation on border-crossing identity by offering particular pedagogical clues for facilitating such a transformation. In addition, its uniqueness is the development of the understanding that

¹¹ Katherine Turpin, "Disrupting the Luxury of Despair: Justice and Peace Education in Contexts of Relative Privilege," *Teaching Theology and Religion* 11, no. 3, 141-152.

¹² Sheryl A. Kujawa-Holbrook, "Beyond Diversity: Cultural Competence, White Racism Awareness, and European-American Theology Students," *Teaching Theology and Religion* 5, no. 3, 141-148.

privilege is something in which faith is invested, to be converted away from as a specific expression of faith.

A Practical Theological Project

Practical theology holds that all theory (including theology) arises from practice, and that all practice has theory (sometimes including theology) embedded in it.¹³ This relationship between theory and practice gives support to the notion that our practices of privilege are not “just the way things are,” but are influenced by prevailing and dominant theories about the ways the world works—practices that *can be changed* by shifting the theories that contribute to how we understand the world to work. As Browning notes, “We may not notice the theories in our practices. We are so embedded in our practices, take them so much for granted, and view them as so natural and self-evident that we never take time to abstract the theory from the practice and look at it as something in itself.”¹⁴

From the view of practical theology, the relationship between theology and practice is a reciprocal relationship, where theology does not and cannot stand alone from the experiences and practices of individuals and communities, and practices do not and cannot help but to be influenced by theories and theologies. Thus, in this study, I am seeking to understand how the practices of identity construction as described by my research population influence how they understand the act of conversion in their lives, and, reciprocally, how this understanding of conversion influences how they construct their identities as persons with privilege. In this view, the construction of the identity of

¹³ Don S. Browning, *A Fundamental Practical Theology: Descriptive and Strategic Proposals* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1991), 6.

¹⁴ Browning, 6.

border-crosser does not happen without the attendant activity of conversion, and likewise, and at the same time, this process of conversion and how conversion is understood is influenced directly by the project of identity re-construct from privilege to border-crossing. As a result of this reciprocal relationship, our understanding of theologies and practices of conversion are revised and renewed, becoming ever relevant to the needs of new concerns, communities, and contexts.

In addition to being committed to recognizing the reciprocity of relationship between theory and practices, and a desire to revise theologies and practices of conversion, I am also concerned that this practical theological project contribute to empowerment and liberation. Toward this end, this paper depicts the nuances of these conversions with a commitment to what Graham, Walton, and Ward term “theology in action.”¹⁵ This a praxis model of theological reflection and construction that has as its central concern the uniting of theory and practice toward empowerment and liberation. For this reason, my practical theological concerns are centered on an understanding of practice as *habitus*, or what Elaine Graham calls the “practical attitudes” that create society and construct cultural products such as privilege.¹⁶ *Habitus* is generated by historical actions that are reproduced in present acts of agency. According to Graham, it is our ability for creative agency which means that *habitus* can be transformed.¹⁷ Thus, while privilege is a social force that often appears so normative as to be undetectable and unchanging (at least to people with privilege), the practices of socialization that create the

¹⁵ Elaine Graham, Heather Walton, and Frances Ward, *Theological Reflection: Methods* (London: SCM Press, 2005), 170.

¹⁶ Graham, Walton, and Ward, 194.

¹⁷ Elaine L. Graham. *Transforming Practice: Pastoral Theology in an Age of Uncertainty* (1996; repr. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2002), 102-103.

habitus of privilege can be changed. I am interested in the ways in which religious conversion can contribute to this change.

Summary of the Argument

Chapter One will address the problem of privilege. I will describe how privilege is a socially-reproduced habitus and an identity. I will argue that privilege, like oppression, is a product of socialization practices that teach certain people to identify with agent groups through processes of reward and punishment. I will discuss the ways in which privilege and oppression are constructed as *dialectic of dependence*, and how they require one another for their reproduction. I will discuss this dialectic as a dehumanizing and anti-relational force that inhibits justice. I will draw upon the works of Paulo Freire and Patricia Hill Collins to shift from viewing privilege and oppression as a dialectic toward understanding this system as a matrix, one that views the social construction of identity as fluid, with the potential for change. Finally, I will advocate that a third way of constructing identity—that of the border-crossing identity—has the potential to transform this dehumanizing binary and more fully seek power-sharing praxis.

Chapter Two will review existing literature on border-crossing identities—particularly the works of Gloria Anzaldúa, Jung Young Lee, and Virgilio Elizondo—to illuminate how border-crossing identities are constructed. Because of their socialization in spaces within the United States where the dominant culture and a particular marginalized culture meet and interact, these writers are socialized by and identify with both the dominant culture and with a marginalized culture. Though they have been socialized by dominant forces, each one makes an explicit choice to identify and express

solidarity with the oppressed. While living on and in between the boundaries of two cultures—one dominant, one marginal—each writer seeks to construct a both/and identity, as well as a *third way of identity* that moves beyond the dehumanizing dialectic of dependence.

Chapter Three will begin with an exploration of the cognitive, affective, relational, and spiritual barriers to change that make identity transformation from privilege to border-crossing particularly challenging. I will then review relevant models of multicultural encounter and conversion, to glean how they might contribute to addressing issues of privilege and transformation. Claiming that privilege is a system of meaning in which we ultimately invest our faith, I will claim the religious practice of conversion—facilitated via pedagogies of religious education and practices of spiritual formation—has the potential to partner with educational models of consciousness-raising toward the transformation of identities and practices of privilege. I will review how the models of encounter and conversion in the works of Kathleen Talvacchia and Elizabeth Conde-Frazier can contribute to pedagogies of conversion for people with privilege, helping to craft an understanding of conversion not as a one-time, sudden and total change, but as a gradual, ongoing commitment to a new way of being, integrating identity, knowledge, and experience toward a new vision of self and ultimate meaning. Using Rambo and Farhadian's heuristic of stages depicting the process of conversion, these works will be placed in conversation with a qualitative study of persons of privilege who embody transformations of identity as border-crossers, to understand what this process of conversion might look like.

Chapter Four will reflect the stories of identity construction and understandings of conversion for my research participants. I will introduce and describe the lives and work of these people, and will share how they name the origins of the construction of their identities of privilege, including the encounters that mark the beginning of the construction of their identities as border-crossers. The heart of this chapter will reflect the ways in which these people's journeys of transformation reflect a process of conversion, detailing a step-by-step heuristic of conversion for people with privilege seeking transformation toward border-crossing and power-sharing. Finally, I will describe how these persons understand their identities as border-crossers, and identify the practices of power-sharing that are inspired in their ongoing their conversion toward becoming border-crossers.

Based upon what we will have learned about the nature of border-crossing identities for people with privilege, and the processes of conversion that sustain their continued identity transformation, Chapter Five will offer clues to pedagogical practices of conversion that might help to facilitate such a change.

The Qualitative Study

The qualitative study that is part of this project seeks to understand how people who do ministry across lines of race and class—from the perspective of privilege as an intentional power-sharing activity—developed border-crossing identities and how they understand their transformations as processes of conversion. Toward this goal, this project reflects the stories of eleven adult men and women who have spent at least three years in some form of multicultural or anti-oppression/social justice ministry, who spend the majority of their work time engaging in encounters across lines of race and class.

These are people who are able to identify the operation of privilege in their lives and to identify as border-crossers when offered that particular language to describe their understanding of vocation and identity. Because of the duration of their work, it is assumed that these people have established some effectiveness as persons with privilege regularly crossing borders of race and class.

A Grounded Theory Approach

The design of this study follows a “grounded theory” approach to qualitative research. The grounded theory approach I draw from finds its genesis in the work of Anselm L. Strauss and Barney G. Glaser, who developed this research method in order to understand the experiences of terminally ill patients in hospital settings in such a way that their data-gathering and analysis be guided not by abstract hypotheses, but rather by research grounded in data gathered in the research setting.¹⁸ My research design and data-gathering are informed, most prominently, by the descriptive work of grounded theory offered by Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin,¹⁹ and by Kathy Charmaz, who extends this work via a set of practical guidelines for conducting a grounded theory study.²⁰

Grounded theory can be defined as a research process that builds theory from data that starts as lived experience, drawing theoretical insights from the descriptive and reflective experiences of persons in a particular context. Charmaz further describes grounded theory as a set of research methods that reflect “systematic, yet flexible

¹⁸ Kathy Charmaz, *Constructing Grounded Theory: A Practical Guide through Qualitative Analysis* (Los Angeles: SAGE Publications, 2006), 4.

¹⁹ Anselm Strauss and Juliet Corbin, *Basics of Qualitative Research: Techniques and Procedures for Developing Grounded Theory*, 2nd ed. (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1998).

²⁰ Charmaz, 4.

guidelines for collecting and analyzing qualitative data to construct theories ‘grounded’ in the data themselves.”²¹

Strauss and Corbin offer some basic movements for data-gathering that grounded theory studies employ. These movements include:

1. Description: data collected through conversations, narratives, interviews, vignettes.
2. Conceptual ordering: identifying themes and preliminary theorizing.
3. Theorizing: formulating themes or ideas in an explanatory scheme.²²

This project can further be characterized as a narrative inquiry approach to grounded theory research. In the description phase, participations were asked to share “biographical life histories.”²³ These are stories of experiences that have shaped, disrupted, and transformed their identities as people with privilege. Narratives were gathered via phone and in-person interviews with study participants, supplemented by a brief, online survey with the purpose of gathering basic demographic data.

During the phase of conceptual ordering, narratives gathered during data collection were gleaned for prominent themes. While systems for identifying prominent themes (often called “coding”) in grounded theory research can often be quite elaborate, Charmaz asserts that grounded theory should reflect “a set of principles and practices, not . . . prescriptions or packages” for gathering and analyzing research data.²⁴ Therefore, I have not employed a detailed coding system in my process of data-collection. Rather, this study employs the basic process of description, conceptual ordering, and theorizing

²¹ Charmaz, 2.

²² Strauss and Corbin, 21-24.

²³ John W. Creswell, *Qualitative Inquiry and Research Design: Choosing among Five Traditions* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 1998), 47-51.

²⁴ Charmaz, 9.

described above, using only some basic coding during the conceptual ordering phase in order to pull out prominent themes for analysis and theory building.

As such, this study moves from conceptual ordering to theorizing by placing the themes that emerge in the life stories and experiences of the persons studied in conversation with various literatures on identity development and religious conversion to elucidate how identities of privilege are formed, expressed, disrupted, and transformed as a phenomenon in the lives of this particular group of people. I rely on the emergent themes that arise from the research participants' stories to add nuance to what we already know about theories of socialization and religious conversion, and to add dimension to and challenge theories where necessary.

My Role as Researcher

I enter the research process with particular practical and political concerns. I am not a neutral or purely objective data-gatherer. My goal is to glean insights about disruptions of privilege in particular, and, in however partial a way I am able participate in its actualization, to contribute to the project of liberation from the dehumanizing effects of difference and privilege. My presuppositions and commitments are an inevitable part of the research process. Dori Grinenko Baker describes this recognition of the particularity of the researcher in the data collection process as "critical ethnography."²⁵ She writes, "By situating myself in the research space, I name myself as a player. Along with my tape recorder and notebook, I bring my empathic personhood. The result of such qualitative research does not pretend to be scientific or universal."²⁶

²⁵ Dori Grinenko Baker, "Future Homemakers and Feminist Awakenings: Autoethnography as a Method in Theological Education and Research," *Religious Education* 96, no. 3 (Summer 2001), 399.

²⁶ Baker, 399.

My particular story as a border-crosser and as a person who identifies with privilege motivates my work. I come to this topic as one who inhabits a border-crossing identity that renders my privilege obvious. I am the child of a divided Oklahoma, descendant of land-running farmers and Cherokee political activists—two groups in stark political opposition.²⁷ Though I bear characteristics of worldview, orientation, and relationship that do not reflect white, middle-class norms, I am at the same time never *not* privileged—I have white skin, I am highly educated, and I have significant economic stability.

My education into border-crossing as a person with privilege started early. As a child, I would accompany my father—president of a small, United Methodist university—as he preached at various churches in an attempt to recruit students to the school. We went to rural white churches, to poor Native American churches, to Black Methodist churches. In these settings I watched my father navigate identity and relationship on the borders, marrying his identity as a Cherokee farmer's son with his stature as a college president and ordained minister. As I look back now, it is my early experiences in these borderland spaces that contributed to the construction of my own border-crossing identity.

It was only in crossing borders again as an adult that I remembered these early experiences, and came to this realization of my own identity as a border-crosser with privilege. I also experienced my own conversion of sorts. At a Latin American Bible/community college in Southern California—a setting in which I was the only non-Latino/a and the only white person—I taught in a college preparation program. With

²⁷ An explanation of my family's history as it is situated within Oklahoma history is described in by my father in: Jerald C. Walker, *The State of Sequoyah* (Kansas City: Lowell Press, 1985).

little to their names materially, my first- and second-generation immigrant students taught me about reliance upon a God who is present with them in the midst of deep material and psychic pain. This was in stark contrast to the rationalistic, disembodied faith that I had been steeped in growing up in the white United Methodist church. As one student put it, “When you have nothing else in this world, knowledge of an absolute God is essential.” From my students, I came to understand the significance of the movement of the Holy Spirit; both in the religious practice of speaking in tongues, and also in the Spirit’s movement in the community of learners. These were faith understandings and practices that were very foreign, and quite uncomfortable, for me. Through my border-crossing encounters with my students, I came to understand what it means to set aside my own presuppositions about truth and rightness, and to open myself to the fuller meaning of Spirit and truth. With that came an understanding of what it means to see the image of God in another who is very unlike myself, and to be transformed—yes, converted—in my identity and my faith through these relationships.

However, I am still a person with privilege. The challenge that my identity of privilege brings to my study is that I, too, participate in the very expression of privilege that I am seeking to dismantle. There may be ways in which neither I nor the persons I am studying can identify the ways that we continue to participate in the habitus of privilege and the reproduction of systems of domination. There is a risk that those of us who are doing work to dismantle privilege will not get it right, that the very identities I am seeking to challenge and transform will not be changed. According to Sharon D. Welch, people with privilege often have an overwhelming preoccupation with getting it right, enacting ethical behavior only when we can control the outcome of our actions,

ensuring a positive result.²⁸ I believe we are required to take the risk to transgress new boundaries of identity despite the potential for failure.

The Study's Participants

The people included in this study are eleven adults working in border-crossing educational and ministry settings. That is, they are people with privilege working across lines of race and class as their main professional work. They are people who can self-identify as border-crossers, who are able to offer nuanced language about how privilege operates in their identities, work, and relationships, and who are committed to the process of becoming border-crossers as a lifelong project of conversion.

Selection criteria for this study included the professional setting described above combined with the requirement that they have been doing this work for three or more years, thus having established an effectiveness for the work they do. As conversations with research participants developed, it also became important for research participants to be able to articulate the ways in which they experience privilege in relation to those they minister with, and to self-identify as border-crossers when offered that particular language to describe some aspect of their self-understanding. Therefore, while 20 research participants were originally approached and interviewed for this study, some interviews were discarded, due to an inability to meet these latter criteria.²⁹

Research participants were sought and selected using a “multiple snowball entry” approach.³⁰ Initial respondents were invited to participate via my own professional

²⁸ Sharon D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 14.

²⁹ Some interviews were also discarded because mandatory consent forms were not received by the researcher.

³⁰ Laurent A. Parks Daloz, et al., *Common Fire: Leading Lives of Commitment in a Complex World* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1996), 244.

networks. At the end of each interview, these people were asked to identify others they know who might fit my selection criteria. This provided a “snowball” effect, leading to additional research participants.

The demographic breakdown of the eleven research participants includes six people identifying as female, four identifying as male, and one identifying as gender queer. Six of the respondents identify as white, one as Black/Caribbean of African Descent, one as Latina, one as bi-cultural Filipino and Bolivian, and one as Irish, German, Ukrainian and Choctaw (Native American), and one as “mixed-blood.” Five respondents identified as middle class, three as upper middle class, one as privileged, and one as a “class straddler—raised working class and now professional class.” The participants range in age from 30-62. Two were born outside of the United States (Jamaica and El Salvador), and all are U.S. citizens. Eight are ordained clergy of various denominational affiliation (United Methodist, Unitarian Universalist Association, Episcopal, and Christian/United Church of Christ), while three are lay members of Protestant Christian denominations.

It is important to note that all of the people in this study are not classically privileged white, middle-class people (though many of them are). A number of the people I interviewed come from traditionally marginalized racial/ethnic groups, but are able to identify with privilege as it resides in one or more elements of their identities—social class, sexual identity, citizenship, etc. Additionally, a number of the white, middle-class members of the study reflect an awareness of their race- and class-based privileges, but can identify a portion of their identities with a marginalized group—for example, many of these respondents are women, gay, or lesbian. As you will read

Chapter One, there is significant literature on the nature of oppression being an “interlocking” system, denoting the ways that oppression permeates social life and affects everyone’s lives. As reflected in the demographic makeup of the people in this story, it is clear that the privilege, as it is in direct relation to oppression, also functions in interlocking ways. Thus, while persons might experience the pressure of oppression as significant pieces of their identities interact with the social world, there are other ways in which those same people experience privilege. This is not to deny or neglect the deeply significant ways that many people are under the pressure of oppression. Rather, it is to heighten our awareness to the ways that we do hold power, and the ways that the holding of this power means that we unhelpfully maintain and benefit from systems of injustice.

Respondents were given the option to conceal their identities or to choose to have their names and identifying characteristics/circumstances included in the study. While not pressured to either maintain their identities or to conceal them, I intentionally offered the opportunity for respondents to make this choice and not to immediately conceal their identities. I did this for two reasons. First, these people are doing good work to dismantle privilege in their own lives. It seems important, should this dissertation be published, that others know of the good work that these individuals and the organizations they work for are a part of. Additionally, I identify confession of the limits of one’s knowledge and of one’s participation in systems of domination as essential pieces of transforming identities and practices of privilege. Participation in this study in ways that does not conceal one’s identity contributes to this process of confession and conversion.

Data Collection

Data were collected from research participants in two ways. First, each person received a brief, online questionnaire designed to gather demographic data. This questionnaire was followed-up by an interview of 1-1.5 hours in length, conducted by phone or in-person. With the knowledge and consent of the research participants, interviews were recorded via voice recording software. I transcribed the recordings using a word processing software.

In order to understand how their identities of privilege were shaped, disrupted, and re-shaped, participants in this study were asked to share stories and reflections about their early socialization into identities of privilege, moments of encounter that prompted a questioning or crisis of identity in relation to their social locations, and experiences that have contributed to a re-shaping of their identities as people with privilege. Additionally, they were asked to share their self-understandings as border-crossers, and to detail the ways in which they understand their particular transformations of identity to reflect processes of conversion. Interview questions included the following:

1. Think back to your childhood/adolescence, your family life, schooling, etc. As you look back now, were there signals present that you experienced privilege? What were they?
2. Looking at your life now, how do you know that you experience privilege?
3. Tell me a story about a time that prompted you to think critically about your own privilege.
4. What does it mean to you to be a “border-crosser?”
5. How do you understand the importance of sharing power as a border-crosser? What does sharing power look like for you? What challenges/opportunities does it pose?

How do you understand the importance of connecting with another culture on its own terms? What does that look like? What challenges/opportunities does it pose?

How do you understand the importance of engaging in unfamiliar practices/ways of thinking and doing? What does that look like? What challenges/opportunities does it pose?

6. Tell me about a time when you were in a border-crossing encounter, where you intended to offer something (ideas, leadership, etc.) that you considered helpful or constructive, but that was not received as such. What happened? How did that make you feel? Did you adjust your thoughts or behavior as a result of that encounter?
7. What symbols/rituals/beliefs have meaning for you as you pursue the border-crossing work that you do? What is the vision of hope toward which you are working?
8. What kinds of practices sustain your work as a border-crosser?
9. When things become discouraging or hopeless, what renews your hope?

The process of narrative-based data collection requires a certain exploratory curiosity on the part of the researcher, where the process of questioning become less like following a map and more like following particular trails one comes upon. Thus, while I entered each interview with the questions above providing a basic map to guide the conversation, I employed a reflexivity in my questioning that would allow me to seek clarification and elaboration, and follow certain trails of curiosity that developed as the conversation unfolded. I was able to cover the majority, if not all, of these questions during the course of each conversation, but each interview was not identical in terms of the pattern and content of questioning.

Possibilities and Limitations of this Research

To develop the theories presented in this project, I compared themes that emerged from these interviews with prominent theories on privilege, border-crossing, identity, and

conversion. In comparing my data with these theories, I developed nuance and made adjustment to existing theories based upon the stories told by the people in my study. While I was not afforded the opportunity go back and verify my findings with each research participants, I think that this project nonetheless draws significant insights about how we might reconceive and revise current theologies and religious educational practices to more effectively address the problem of systemic inequality.

Further, there is a way in which this project is not as verifiably objective as if I had used a more detailed coding process or if I had employed additional or other research methods. Because the theories reflected in this study arise from the life experiences of particular people, there may be ways in which the themes identified in the stories of these eleven people may not resonate with larger populations of those who experience privilege. A possibility for further research might be to expand the sample population, in order to verify these initial findings.

These limitations notwithstanding, there is always incredible truth to be glimpsed by hearing the stories of everyday people. The promise of grounded theory research is that it allows us to discover new theories, and to elaborate on existing theories, out of lived data. This means that theory does not emerge from abstract concerns, but from the stuff of everyday life. In the case of this study, the opportunity that grounded theory brings is the chance to know more about specific theoretical concepts—border-crossing and conversion—in light of the experiences of a particular group of people. As religious educators, we can clarify our pedagogical theories and practices in the context of multicultural education in ways that might affect change in ways not previously imagined. We are able to draw theoretical and pedagogical insights for transformation

not just in the basic context of what all persons in multicultural contexts must do to cross borders, but what privileged people in particular must do.

Chapter 1

The Problem of Privilege

All historically relevant models of liberation teach us that freedom from oppression must be borne out of the knowledge and experiences of the oppressed. However, because privilege and oppression are constructed by social systems in such a way that the very existence of oppression relies upon the perpetuation of privilege, and vice versa, we cannot neglect attention to either element of this interlocking dynamic. The activities of the privileged—those who express entitlement and enact domination in a society that teaches us to believe that the power we hold is our inalienable right—are inextricably connected to the oppressions from which liberation is sought. A singular focus on the recipients of domination denies the power that expressions of privilege have in continuing to perpetuate injustice.

To focus on the conditions of oppression without attention to the dynamics of privilege that generate these systems is to fail to address the origins of this dynamic.³¹ Furthermore, though both critical social analysis and reflection upon our core assumptions related to such issues as prejudice, entitlement, and domination are important pieces of addressing systems of injustice, we must also pay attention to the ways that we are deeply socialized to inhabit *identities* of privilege that affect our *practices* of entitlement and domination. Paulo Freire tells us that a consistent preoccupation of the “non-poor” is to stay at the subjective level of analysis of issues of privilege and oppression, analyzing the *cognitive assumptions* about dominant and subordinate groups that motivate expressions of entitlement and domination. He

³¹Joseph Barndt, *Dismantling Racism: The Continuing Challenge to White America* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress Press, 1991), 37.

advocates, rather, that a shift to engaging our *practices* of privilege have a better chance of addressing the root causes of oppression.³² Likewise, and in a different vein, Peggy McIntosh reminds us that a preoccupation of white feminists, in particular, is to sustain focus on the largest, most systemic issues of concern, and not on how domination is enacted in everyday life.³³ Again, we see here a position advocating for a shift from a singular focus on analysis, to attention to our practices.

I argue that these practices are deeply socialized patterns of behavior that we repeat in predictable and comfortable ways that often go unnoticed, because they sit at the core of our identities. In addition to conscientization and critical analysis, dismantling practices of privilege and domination must also include the work of resisting the practices of socialization and transforming the identities of privilege that are the seedbed for domination.

The dynamic of privilege and oppression is reliant upon a dependent and polarizing relationship between privilege and oppression, whereby one cannot exist without the other. This dependent, binary relationship has at its root a particularly strong cultural commitment to individualism and the myth of meritocracy – the notion that one’s privilege is the result of hard work and individual merit. A shift to understanding privilege and oppression as an interlocking system—one that provides unearned advantages to certain groups while maintaining their neutrality under the guise of individualism—is essential in developing the relational worldview and understanding of identity that might help us to push past the dehumanizing dialectic of privilege and

³² Alice Frazier Evans, Robert A. Evans, and William Bean Kennedy, *Pedagogies for the Non-Poor* (1995; repr. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2000), 220.

³³ Peggy McIntosh, “White Privilege and Male Privilege: A Personal Account of Coming to See Correspondences through Work in Women’s Studies,” in *Race, Class, and Gender: An Anthology*, 2nd edition, ed. Margaret L. Andresen and Patricia Hill Collins (Belmont, CA: Wadsworth, 1995), 82.

oppression. In order to challenge this binary and the individualism that is at its root, I suggest that the development of a border-crossing identity amongst people with privilege might shift from understanding our identities as either/or to both/and.

This is not simply a cognitive transformation of identity, but rather one that is grounded in what Freire describes as conversion: “Those who authentically commit themselves to the people must reexamine themselves constantly. . . . Conversion to the people requires a profound rebirth. Those who undergo it must take on a new form of existence; they can no longer remain as they were.”³⁴ This requires a profound change in the way one’s self-understanding is constructed in relation to the world—emotionally, relationally, and spiritually—in addition to how one critically analyzes his or her practices and the social dynamics that perpetuate injustice.

What Is Privilege?

In Peggy McIntosh’s seminal article in which she articulates the dynamics of privilege that are present in both male domination and white domination, she describes privilege as “an invisible package of unearned assets that I can count on cashing in each day, but about which I was ‘meant’ to remain oblivious.”³⁵ Though McIntosh rightly notes that all forms of privilege do not look exactly the same and do not operate in the same ways,³⁶ she provides some helpful markers of privilege that are present in its every form: it’s perpetuation as that which is unearned yet powerfully dominant, it’s invisibility, and it’s relation to material and/or social gain as something to be “cashed in.”

³⁴ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th anniversary edition, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 1993), 42-43.

³⁵ McIntosh, 76.

³⁶ McIntosh, 86.

The first important piece of how privilege functions in McIntosh's definition is its association as a system of unearned assets. By simply belonging to a variety of social groups, those of us who operate in these various groups are afforded advantages. We did not earn these advantages, but receive the benefits of these advantages simply because we belong to particular social groups.³⁷ It is this sense of belonging – present in our skin color, our style of dress, our language, our behaviors, our affiliations and networks, in combination with the ways that these markers are endorsed and rewarded by society—that marks us as privileged.

We often think of these designations as biological or part of the natural order of things, but these groups have been constructed by society in order to shape our common life with distinctions of difference used to reward a minority with elite status and marginalize and disenfranchise a majority as different or deviant.³⁸ For example, while no scientific evidence exists to delineate biological differences between people based upon skin color, society has created categorical divisions called “race” and attached characteristics of attribution and behavior to those groups based upon skin color, shape of body and face, and texture of hair. This happens through a process by which people in society externalize subjective assumptions about groups, creating categories such as “race” as objects external to human subjectivity, teaching its members internalize these categories as “real.”³⁹ The privileges that we attach to race, social class, gender, and other categories of privilege are not the result of biological fact or the natural order of

³⁷ McIntosh, 82.

³⁸ Mary Elizabeth Hobgood, *Dismantling Privilege: An Ethics of Accountability* (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 2000), 12.

³⁹ Tracey E. Ore, “Introduction: Constructing Differences,” in *The Social Construction of Difference and Inequality: Race, Class, Gender, and Sexuality*, ed. Tracy E. Ore (Mountain View, CA: Mayfield Publishing Company, 2000), 5.

things, but are the result of a process of objectification and internalization whereby we associate some groups as morally and socially superior and other groups as morally and socially deviant. Thus, though I was born with white skin, it is the ways society objectifies white skin and provides me rewards based upon my skin color that gives me advantage. I did not earn these advantages, they simply exist because my white skin has become associated as a positive attribute by dominant culture, and I am rewarded for that.

McIntosh teaches us that the advantages associated with privilege take two forms: unearned entitlements and conferred dominance. The first of these, unearned entitlements, McIntosh describes as rights that should not have to be earned, but that society sets aside as entitlements to a select few. For instance, McIntosh notes that the basic human need for belonging is an entitlement that all persons should be afforded.⁴⁰ This belonging provides us access to the communities, services, and institutions that are necessary to be clothed and fed, to find affordable housing and medical care, to build community and create a common life. Though entitlements such as belonging should exist for all, McIntosh notes, “At present, since only a few have it, it is an unearned advantage.”⁴¹

An equally insidious “advantage” we receive when we belong to privileged groups is access to conferred dominance.⁴² Conferred dominance, she says, “Gives permission to control, because of one’s race or sex [or religion, or sexual orientation].”⁴³ Conferred dominance is present, for example, by the very fact that we as people with various privileges can choose when and how to engage issues of privilege and

⁴⁰ McIntosh, 84.

⁴¹ McIntosh, 84.

⁴² McIntosh, 83.

⁴³ McIntosh, 83.

oppression, or simply to ignore them. As a middle-class person afforded a number of educational opportunities, I can either decide to share what I know about succeeding in education with others, or I can decide not to do that. In the decision toward inaction, I allow middle-class people like myself to continue to dominate the knowledge production and building of material and social resources that happens as a result of participation in higher education. It is this “agency,” the unearned ability to choose our comforts and discomforts, which our privilege affords us.⁴⁴ But dominance goes far beyond the choices we make to engage issues of injustice. Dominance decides what counts as legitimate knowledge and who makes crucial decisions, which voices are heard and which are silenced, who receives resources and who does not. To call this advantage a “privilege” as a positive attribute is a misnomer, for as McIntosh states, “though ‘privilege’ may confer power, it does not confer moral strength.”⁴⁵

The second important piece of McIntosh’s definition of privilege is the designation of privilege as something invisible, something taken for granted that often goes undetected, but that has significant material and social implications. The agency that we have as people with privilege in a system that rewards our expressions of entitlement and domination affords us the ability to overlook, ignore, or deny our own privilege as nonexistent. This ability to ignore our privilege is itself an expression of the power that our privilege affords us. McIntosh rightly calls this behavior “oblivion,” a privilege that goes so undetected that the privileged among us cannot identify it while at the same time we are expressing it.⁴⁶ Thus, while many of us have done significant work

⁴⁴ Stephanie M. Wildman, *Privilege Revealed: How Invisible Preference Undermines America* (New York: New York University Press, 1996), 16.

⁴⁵ McIntosh, 83.

⁴⁶ McIntosh, 78.

to understand the ways we dominate, we have been socialized to overlook and ignore our own expressions of entitlement and dominating practices—sometimes they go entirely unnoticed, sometimes we choose not to address them. In either case, we can remain oblivious because dominant society has conferred upon us the power to do so.

This agency to overlook our own practices of entitlement and domination does not go entirely undetected, however. Those who are the recipients of our domination—women, people of color, non-Christians, non-citizens, homosexual, bi-sexual and transgendered persons, and those who are disabled—consistently encounter and are confronted by our expressions of entitlement and domination. Audre Lorde calls this endorsement of all things privileged as the center of reality the “mythical norm:”

Somewhere, on the edge of consciousness, there is what I call a mythical norm, which each one of us within our hearts knows ‘that is not me.’ In America, this norm is usually defined as white, thin, male, heterosexual, Christian, and financially secure. It is with this mythical norm that the trappings of power reside within this society.⁴⁷

Again, the “norm” associated with privileges such as whiteness, middle-classness, maleness, etc. are mythical in that they have been constructed by society as the norm, as something natural that cannot be changed or dismantled. In the ability to identify one’s self as not residing inside of that norm by stating “this is not me,” Lorde is able to identify the norm and the power that resides within that norm.

While those who are the recipients of our expressions of entitlement and domination can more readily (and unfortunately) name these as expressions of agency and privilege, it is not up to those who are oppressed as a result of our domination to enlighten us to the errors of our ways and help us to identify and transform our

⁴⁷Audre Lorde, *Sister Outsider: Essays and Speeches* (Trumansburg, NY: Crossing Press, 1984), 116.

dominating practices. This is the deep challenge of dismantling privilege. It is those of us with the power to address our privilege to come to consciousness of the ways we dominate, to confess the limits of our knowledge (present in the very reality of being unable to identify our own privilege), and to seek to be transformed.

The third important piece of McIntosh's definition of privilege is her attention to the ways we "cash in" the various pieces of our identities that reflect privilege, toward greater material and social gain. She writes, regarding white privilege in particular: "White privilege is like an invisible weightless knapsack of special provisions, assurances, tools, maps, guides, codebooks, passports, visas, clothes, compass, emergency gear, and blank checks."⁴⁸ Note that the invisible provisions that McIntosh describes are all tools for survival (maps, emergency gear, clothes), for citizenship (passports, visas), and for obtaining wealth (blank checks). Thus, our association with privileged groups and our agency to move about the world in ways that allow us to control our social realities and interactions provides us with myriad social and material gains that further perpetuate our own health, belonging, and material security.

These gains are what social philosopher Pierre Bourdieu calls "capital"—material, social, cultural, and symbolic resources that we acquire and "cash in" in order to advance our standing in society.⁴⁹ In addition to the monetary capital we acquire and spend as a result of our elite status, privileged status allows us to acquire social capital in the form of affiliations and networks that increase our social standing, and cultural capital in the form of goods and skills (the language preferences, behavior patterns, and styles of dress associated with class standing or educational attainment, for example) that allow us

⁴⁸ McIntosh, 77.

⁴⁹ David Swartz, *Culture & Power: The Sociology of Pierre Bourdieu* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), 73.

access to the resources and institutions that can increase our social standing. Finally, symbolic capital provides us a means of legitimization that signifies belonging to particular elite social groups. Diplomas, tenure, memberships to sororities and fraternities, season tickets to arts and sporting events, and affiliations to various professional groups are all sources of legitimization that communicate to us that we have “arrived” to some form of elite status.

A central element of Bourdieu’s claim is that privilege is necessarily a minority status, a class that claims certain forms of capital to distinguish its elite status. If such resources become more widely acquired, they lose their elite status. For instance, if I hold an elite club card on a major airline and have access to a special lounge and buffet meal, and that lounge and meal become available to more passengers, the cultural capital associated with that lounge and meal loses its value. In this case, the airline might raise the stakes for elite status to include a separate lounge with showers and a champagne brunch to reinstate my elite status. In this sense “inequality is a perpetual characteristic of social groups,” because elite sources of capital are constantly being generated.⁵⁰ Further, though the various forms of capital are interchangeable, the holding of material capital provides the time and space necessary to acquire other forms of capital.⁵¹

McIntosh provides us helpful building blocks for understanding how privilege and the resources associated with privilege function socially. She helps us to see that while we did not earn these privileges, the entitlements and practices of domination that are attached to these privileges are reinforced when we overlook, deny, or ignore their existence, and at the core of expressions of privilege is the acquisition of capital

⁵⁰ Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003), 277.

⁵¹ Swartz, 80.

resources that sustain our elite status. I believe this to be true across lines of identity—that is, across the privileges associated with race, social class, gender, citizenship, sexual identity, religion, and physical ability.

How We Are Socialized into Identities of Privilege

The process of perpetuating this system of denial and reward is not one of simple acquisition and exchange. To understand how these practices of privilege are perpetuated, despite our best efforts to address systems of inequality, it is important to inquire as to how these practices are generated by society and internalized by individuals. Through interactions with family and other social institutions (school and church are among the most influential) people are socialized into specific, unequal roles in society. While some may find this system uncomfortable – as it surely is for people who are deeply socialized into lives of material, psychic, and spiritual oppression – society provides systems of reward and punishment that maintain the status quo and perpetuate systems of privilege and oppression. This system of reward and punishment provides the social reinforcement that allows practices of entitlement and domination to be internalized by individuals and replicated by social groups.

Bourdieu calls the social venues where we acquire capital and internalize privileged identities “fields.” These fields are the institutions (government bodies, schools, churches, medical systems, etc.) that serve to generate distinctions about what sources of capital will be afforded elite status and how those resources are maintained and exchanged. Bourdieu calls our participation in the maintenance of patterns of

inequality practices of “habitus.”⁵² Our habitus are the practices that we unconsciously repeat in predictable and comfortable ways within social systems, even if such practices perpetuate systems of inequality. Our practices do not become habitus until they become so commonplace as to go unnoticed by us:

In order for a particular habitus to function smoothly, individuals must normally think that the possibilities from which they choose are necessities, common sense, natural or inevitable. . . . Systems, rules, laws, etc. can only function effectively as habitus if we do not think about the social/historical conditions or contexts that produce those categories of meaning.⁵³

Therefore, the practices of entitlement and domination that accompany the acquisition of capital and increased privilege toward which we are socialized become part of our habitus when we are no longer able to predict or identify their expression. A significant habitus of privilege, then, is the ability to neglect our expressions of entitlement and domination.

Bobbie Harro provides a helpful “Cycle of Socialization,” that details how persons in the United States are born into the kinds of self-perpetuating cycles of inequality about which Bourdieu theorizes.⁵⁴ Through interactions with family and social institutions, says Harro, people are socialized into specific, unequal roles in society. The cycle begins at birth, when we are born into a society with particular assumptions regarding constructs such as race and gender, attaching particular meanings to those constructs. Our families are the first “field” we encounter that socialize us toward the particular norms and assumptions that will shape our habitus. This first socialization is

⁵² Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1984).

⁵³ Jen Webb, Tony Schirato, and Geoff Danaher, *Understanding Bourdieu* (Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE Publications, 2002), 38-39.

⁵⁴ Bobbie Harro, “The Cycle of Socialization,” in *Readings for Diversity and Social Justice: An Anthology on Racism, Antisemitism, Sexism, Heterosexism, Ableism, and Classism*, ed. Maurianne Adams, et al. (New York: Routledge, 2000), 17.

both intrapersonal—teaching us how to understand ourselves—and interpersonal—teaching us how to relate to others.⁵⁵ It is in the home where we learn how to understand ourselves and behave as “good girls” or “bad boys,” where we are taught either to communicate with adults by negotiating as equals, or to see children and adults in hierarchical relationship where there is little room for negotiation.⁵⁶

When we reach elementary school age, our social sphere widens and we begin to engage a greater set of social institutions—most prominently, education. As we engage in more and more social settings, we learn more concretely about gender roles, social class positions, and racial categories, among other social distinctions. What we learn either reinforces what was taught to us in our formative years where the family provided the nucleus of socialization, or they greatly contradict those norms.⁵⁷ The more institutions we encounter over time, the more reinforcements we receive that help to neutralize messages about particular norms that become part of our unnamed habitus.⁵⁸ If we are privileged, we internalize these norms and images with a sense of consonance, reflecting back to us the rightness of who we are. If we inhabit a marginalized social location, we identify these norms and images as “not me.”

⁵⁵ Harro, 17.

⁵⁶ Lareau provides a helpful application of Bourdieu’s theory in her study of the childrearing practices of poor and working-class, and middle- and elite-class families in the United States. In this study, she proposes a model of middle-/elite-class childrearing practices called “concerted cultivation,” where, among other things, parents cultivate in their children an ability to negotiate and communicate with adults as equals. She describes a poor or working-class model of childrearing as an “accomplishment of natural growth model,” where children’s activities are viewed as separate from those of adults, with adults providing directives that children obey without question. The importance of this distinction in childrearing practices, says Lareau, is that social institutions such as education and medicine favor and provide reward for a concerted cultivation model of childrearing, providing reward when children express entitlement. By contrast, children who do not hold these skills for negotiation have a greater sense of alienation from centers of power where expressions of negotiation and entitlement are valued, leaving poor and working-class children distanced from fields which generate capital and provide social reward. Annette Lareau, *Unequal Childhoods: Class, Race, and Family Life* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003).

⁵⁷ Harro, 18.

⁵⁸ Harro, 18.

Harro describes the rewards for cooperative participation in this system, or punishments for not fitting the norm or for challenging the system as “enforcements.”⁵⁹

Rewards and privileges are offered for supporting the status quo, and punishments enacted for not mirroring, for resisting, or for challenging the status quo:

Maximally, [rewards for] maintaining the status quo [include] access to higher places; attention and recognition for having “made it” or being a model member of their group; or the privilege that brings the money, connections or power. . . . People who go against the grain of conventional societal messages are accused of being troublemakers, or making waves, or of being the “cause of the problem.”⁶⁰

The results of this system of reward and punishment are the internalized states of habitus that are expressed as entitlement or oppression. Our collusion with this socialization, because we are rewarded for it, is what perpetuates this system, as we become parents, educators, pastors, and leaders of institutions who promote the status quo by socializing others toward these habitus-forming norms.

Privilege as an Identity

Theories of psychosocial identity development teach us that our identities are formed when our “inner experience and outer circumstance are in harmony with one another, and the image reflected by others is similar to the image within.”⁶¹ This means that the taking on of the habitus of privilege is not only a sociological process, but also a *psychosocial* process, one in which our inner selves and our outer lives participate in an interplay of identity construction. Our habitus of privilege operates not only as practices in which we participate with society, but in the interplay of self and society as they interact to construct our identities.

⁵⁹ Harro, 18-19.

⁶⁰ Harro, 19.

⁶¹ Beverly Daniel Tatum, *“Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?” And Other Conversations About Race* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 21.

According to Erikson, identity is formed when the individual ego encounters social expectations and norms to create a successful psychosocial whole. “A sense of ego identity . . . is the accrued confidence that one’s ability to maintain inner sameness and continuity (one’s ego in the psychological sense) is matched by the sameness and continuity of one’s meaning for others.”⁶² Identity is not formed as a singularly individual process of ego development, or an entirely social process of socialization, but in the interplay between the individual and the social world. Thus, the type of socialization process described by Harro involves an individual ego encountering social reinforcements toward conformity using a system of reward and punishment, internalized by the ego as part of its identity. This interplay is both individual and communal, a process of reflection and observation.⁶³

Identity development is a lifelong journey that includes racial identity development, as well as the development of other social identity markers such as age, gender, social class, sexual identification, and religious preference.⁶⁴ Identities of privilege and subordination are formed when we internalize the messages about ourselves that society mirrors to us. Racial identity theorist Beverly Daniel Tatum calls this the “looking glass self.” She writes:

Where a person is a member of a dominant or advantaged social group, the category is usually not mentioned. That element of their identity is so taken for granted by them that it goes without comment. It is taken for granted by them because it is taken for granted by the dominant culture. . . . The parts of our identity that *do* capture our attention are those that other people notice, and that reflect back to us. The aspect of identity that is the target of others’ attention, and

⁶² Erik Erikson, *Identity and the Life Cycle* (1959; repr. New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1980), 94.

⁶³ Tatum, 19.

⁶⁴ Tatum, 18.

subsequently of our own, often is that which sets us apart as exceptional or ‘other’ in their eyes.”⁶⁵

Often, we are not aware that we carry identities of privilege or practice entitlement and domination as habitus because society does not challenge this piece of our identities and instead provides sources of socialization to reinforce that identity as normal or neutral.

Tatum claims that white racial identity, in particular, becomes apparent for the first time in moments of cognitive dissonance, when their core sense of self is challenged in an encounter in which “race is made visible.”⁶⁶ This might occur in the development of a relationship across racial lines in which racism is made more readily apparent. Often the dissonance associated with the discovery of one’s white racial identity brings about feelings of guilt, shame, and anger when one is made aware of the contradiction between systemic racism and the myth of individual merit.⁶⁷

“Reintegration” marks the stage of white racial identity development, in which the white person transforms anger at the discovery of white racism and one’s own white racial identity toward anger at people of color. Here “the pressure to ignore racism is so strong, and the system of advantage so seductive, many White people get stuck.”⁶⁸ What provides the source of dissonance at the reintegration stage is anger among whites that they are being perceived together with other whites as a social group (a practice that all other racial groups have had to endure), that challenges the “myth of meritocracy.”⁶⁹ This myth would have us believe that our achievements and entitlements are based upon

⁶⁵ Tatum, 21.

⁶⁶ Tatum, 96-97.

⁶⁷ Tatum, 97.

⁶⁸ Tatum, 101.

⁶⁹ Tatum, 105.

individual merit. In this stage, “White people perceive themselves as powerless, even in the face of privilege.”⁷⁰

Individuals enter the more constructive stage of “Immersion/Emersion” once a decision is made to move past an intellectual understanding of racism, toward action that will both address one’s own racist assumptions and practices and construct a positive sense of racial identity. In this stage, allies are sought out as role models of Whites who have constructed an affirming, anti-racist White identity.⁷¹ This is followed by an autonomy stage of “racial self-actualization.” Autonomy involves recognition that Whiteness is part of the makeup of one’s identity, an openness to thinking through the cultural dynamics of racism occurs, and individuals often engage intentionally in multiracial settings that contribute to the continuation of their racial identity development.⁷² It is important to note that, though this scheme of identity development appears stage-oriented, the kind of self-actualization that Tatum describes is a life-long project, precisely because the forces that would socialize us toward identities of privilege are so pervasive and so powerful.

What seems important about pointing out that privilege occurs in the interplay of identity and social construction is that dismantling privilege cannot be only a matter of critical social analysis and engagement at the institutional level, or about interrogating core assumptions at the individual level. Transforming identities of privilege and the societal mechanisms that provoke them cannot, in this sense, be an either/or proposition. Any model of praxis that works toward disrupting privilege must include attention to the ways the habitus of privilege is produced by society and the ways that habitus is

⁷⁰ Tatum, 105.

⁷¹ Tatum, 109.

⁷² Tatum, 112.

internalized and expressed by individuals who, in turn, reproduce this habitus as they engage the communities and institutions around them. This study is an attempt to move past the either/or binaries that contribute to the maintenance of privilege and oppression, to understand the interplay between individual and society, and to re-craft the constructive transformation of privileged persons as both/and people who are able to function as bridges between social worlds, as people who can cross borders of identity and habitus, and move toward power-sharing praxis. As Freire states, “Freedom is not an ideal located outside of man [*sic*]; nor is it an idea which becomes myth. It is rather the indispensable condition for the quest for human completion.”⁷³

From a Dialectic of Dependence to a “Matrix of Domination”

Freire teaches us that it is the either/or dialectical relationship of dependence between oppressor and oppressed that makes possible the maintenance of the dynamic of injustice. It is this *dialectic of dependence* that allows certain groups’ identities and experiences to appear the standard or norm for society while other groups are targeted and marginalized as different and deviant. In this system, the oppressors are able to maintain their privilege precisely because the oppressed are rendered their opposite.⁷⁴

Freire builds his analysis of the dehumanizing relationship between oppressor and oppressed upon the social philosophy of Hegel, whose dialectic maintains that the relationship between oppressor and oppressed is one in which the oppressor is operating independently for his/her own ends, while the oppressed is also operating for the oppressors’ ends.⁷⁵ Thus, the dialectic of privilege and oppression says Freire, is one of

⁷³ Freire, 29.

⁷⁴ Freire, 31.

⁷⁵ Freire, 31.

dependence and antithesis, in which the oppressor could not exist as an oppressor without the oppressed.⁷⁶ He writes:

Any situation in which “A” objectively exploits “B” or hinders his and her pursuit of self-affirmation as a responsible person is one of oppression. Such a situation in itself constitutes violence . . . because it interferes with the individual’s ontological and historical vocation to be more fully human. . . . There would be no oppressed had there been no prior situation of violence to establish their subjugation.⁷⁷

Freire notes here that the existence of the oppressor as an elite entity, “A,” cannot operate as an elite without the existence of “B” as it’s opposite upon whom to enact violence.

This dialectic and the violence that ensues due to its ontological and historical⁷⁸ maintenance dehumanizes both the oppressor and the oppressed.⁷⁹

This dialectic is maintained, says Freire, through the enactment of an either/or relationship between the oppressor and oppressed, in which the oppressor’s existence is viewed as individualistic and subjective, while the oppressed are identified as a social group of objects to use at the oppressors disposal. When the oppressors’ entitlements and dominating practices are challenged by a class of oppressed peoples who are seeking liberation and humanization, the oppressor perceives himself or herself to be oppressed, because the oppressor’s sense of individual rights is challenged.⁸⁰ “Any restriction on this way of life, in the name of the rights of the community [vs. the autonomous individual], appears to the former oppressors as a profound violation of their individual rights. . . . For the oppressors, ‘human beings’ refers only to themselves; other people are

⁷⁶ Freire, 31.

⁷⁷ Freire, 37.

⁷⁸ Freire, 25.

⁷⁹ Freire, 38.

⁸⁰ Freire, 39.

‘things.’”⁸¹ Thus, privilege is maintained, according to Freire, because of a dialectic of dependence between oppressor and oppressed in which the interdependent relationship between the two has been distorted by the myth that persons attain entitlements due to the exercise of individual achievements and merits. In this view, one is either a privileged, subjective individual, or part of a social group of “others” who do not measure up and therefore are receiving their social lot.

Patricia Hill Collins describes this dialectic of dependence in the context of the objectification of Black women in particular, calling this dehumanizing binary of privilege and oppression “dichotomous oppositional difference.”⁸² It is this creation of opposing dualisms, such as man/woman, White/Black, oppressor/oppressed that renders particular social groups as “other.”⁸³ This dualism, she says, objectifies social groups into categories of difference which necessarily involves the subordination of one side of the binary to the other:

Because oppositional dichotomies rarely represent different but equal relationships, they are inherently unstable. Tension is resolved by subordinating one half of the dichotomy to the other. Thus whites rule Blacks, men dominate women, reason is thought superior to emotion in ascertaining truth, facts supersede opinion in evaluating knowledge, and subjects rule objects. The foundations of a complex social hierarchy become grounded in the interwoven concepts of either/or dichotomous thinking, oppositional difference, and objectification. With domination based on difference forming an essential underpinning for this entire system of thought, these concepts invariably imply relationships of superiority and inferiority, hierarchical bonds that mesh with political economies of race, gender, and class oppression.⁸⁴

Echoing Freire’s account of this dehumanizing dialectic of dependence, Collins challenges dualistic understandings of privilege and oppression where Whiteness is

⁸¹ Freire, 39.

⁸² Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment* (1990; repr., New York: Routledge, 1991), 225.

⁸³ Collins, 70.

⁸⁴ Collins, 70.

defined in relation to Blackness, male to female, rich to poor, and so on, so that social groups appear in categories that exist in hierarchical relationships of dependence to one another.⁸⁵ As an alternative to an either/or understanding of oppression, Collins advocates an understanding of oppression as interlocking, “one overarching structure of domination.”⁸⁶ This both/and approach seeks to overcome the dualisms inherent in systems of privilege and oppression by viewing the categories we often associate with privilege and oppression as fluid; one in which persons participate at times as oppressor, at other times as oppressed, and sometimes as both privileged and oppressed.⁸⁷ She writes, “A matrix of domination contains few pure victims or oppressors. Each person derives varying amounts of penalty and privilege from multiple systems of oppression which frame everyone’s lives.”⁸⁸

Collins is trying to push us past our compulsion to view ourselves as individuals, but rather as persons in a “matrix of domination”⁸⁹ in which our constant movement and out of various social systems shifts our privileged or oppressed status (and therefore our habitus). For example, Allan G. Johnson states that his whiteness can never be viewed as a static entity, separate from his gender and sexual orientation: “If I apply for a job, for example, white privilege will usually give me the edge over a similarly qualified Latino. But if the people doing the hiring think I’m gay, my white privilege might lose out to his heterosexual privilege, and he might get the job instead of me.”⁹⁰ The important point

⁸⁵ Collins, 225.

⁸⁶ Collins, 222.

⁸⁷ Collins, 225.

⁸⁸ Collins, 229.

⁸⁹ Collins, 225-227.

⁹⁰ Allan G. Johnson, *Privilege, Power, and Difference*, 2nd ed. (Boston: McGraw-Hill, 2001, 2006), 51.

that Johnson addresses here is that, “each particular form of privilege is part of a much larger system of privilege.”⁹¹

Conclusion: Privilege as Piece of an Interlocking System of Social Production

Viewing privilege within a matrix of domination challenges the individualistic, subject/object dualism that undergirds Freire’s account of the roots of oppression. It seeks to view every expression of privilege as part of a larger system of social production that contributes to our socialization as persons of privilege and the internalization of the habitus of privilege in our identities. Furthermore, to understand privilege and oppression as interlocking and interdependent provides the possibility for those of us who may view ourselves as singularly entitled individuals to reconsider how we move in and out of social systems, expressing a habitus of entitlement and domination that reinforces a dehumanizing dialectic of dependence. Finally, such a model challenges us to become both/and persons, border-crossers, committed to the life-long project of resistance to the socialization practices that craft our identities of privilege, to convert away from our habitus of privilege, toward the building of solidarity with others who are under the pressure of oppression toward the transformation of “the objective reality which has made [the oppressed] . . . ’beings for another.”⁹²

⁹¹ Johnson, 52.

⁹² Freire, 31.

Chapter 2

Border-crossing Identities

Both/and identities and the people who inhabit them are frequently called border-crossers. Often, these are people who live on or have crossed over the physical borders between two countries or who inhabit some sort of physical dividing line between two cultural groups. As a result of the physical borders they cross, these persons' identities are oriented on the borders of two or more cultures. Because they inhabit more than one cultural space in a society that tells us that we should express only one predominant identity, these people describe themselves as never fully accepted nor ever fully rejected by any one culture with which they identify. Likewise, while these persons seek to claim each piece of their identities, they have in common the ability to construct an identity that transcends this dualism, finding a third way of constructing self-understanding that refuses the tidy dualism of insider/outsider.

An exploration of these persons' stories might help us to understand what it looks like to cross borders of race and class, and to consider what it might look like to re-craft our own stories away from the either/or dualisms of privilege and oppression, toward understanding ourselves as both/and people who live at the intersections of and seek to transcend the dynamics of identity construction amidst the interlocking dynamics of privilege and oppression. This is a risky proposition as our tendency as privileged people is to colonize and co-opt the knowledge and resources of others toward our own ends. Can we build solidarity and learn from these border-crossers without owning their experiences and insights (this being its own kind of both/and practice)? Our tendency to dominate means that we may reproduce the very practices we seek to disrupt in the

process of identity reconstruction. Further, there is a risk that we won't get it right.

However, people with privilege often have an overwhelming preoccupation with "getting it right," enacting ethical behavior only when we can control the outcome of our actions or ensure that the result is positive.⁹³ I believe it is our responsibility to take this risk, to transgress new boundaries of identity despite the potential for failure.

(Re)Defining Borders

One way to think about how the dialectic of insider/outsider or oppressor/oppressed is maintained is to think of the various identities and cultural spaces we inhabit as spaces with borders. Borders are what keep insiders in and outsiders out. There are physical borders—the spaces, for instance, where the United States and Mexico meet, heavily patrolled to keep out those who don't "belong." There are cultural borders, embodied in the often unnamed practices that define and communicate who is part of us and who is not. There are borders of knowledge production, designating what kinds of experiences and histories "count" as valid in textbooks, classrooms, and other sites that generate knowledge.

There are times when it is important to maintain a border around who is allowed in and who is not. Borders and boundaries are often important for our safety.⁹⁴ Healthy boundaries keep us safe from psychological or physical violation. The walls that contain our homes can provide space for solace, contentment, and rest. Particular cultural groups

⁹³ Sharon D. Welch, *A Feminist Ethic of Risk*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2000), 14.

⁹⁴ Chandra Talpade Mohanty, *Feminism without Borders: Decolonizing Theory, Practicing Solidarity* (2003; repr., Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2004), 1.

often need to enact boundaries so that they can gather together as a singular group to affirm identity, relax, and build solidarity.⁹⁵

It is the impenetrability of the borders we construct around identity and social belonging that I want to challenge. My intent is not to dissolve borders, but to find ways to inhabit more than one space or identity, to move in between them. Along these lines, Chandra Talapade Mohanty reminds us that though borders are often present, “there is no one sense of a border,” as any given border is experienced differently by people from different social locations.⁹⁶ I want to suggest, also, that because privilege and oppression are experienced in contextual and fluid ways, one can experience borders in different ways, given the ways they experience power in a given situation. Thinking about the borders of cultural and identity in ways that allow for penetrability means that we can begin to “reterritorialize”⁹⁷ our privileged identities, loosening the rigid either/or borders of our privileged identities, toward more malleable, penetrable both/and identities that are open to new ideas, feelings, relationships, and worldviews.

This concept of border-crossing identity is not unlike the concept of hybrid identity offered via post-colonial studies. Hybridity “refers to the creation of new transcultural forms within the contact zone produced by colonization;”⁹⁸ colonization being those geographical zones where transnational superpowers have seized and maintained political rule of distant territories.⁹⁹ In zones of colonization, where multiple cultures are present and interact, a certain “cross-pollination” of identity occurs, “forming

⁹⁵ Beverly Daniel Tatum, *“Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?” And Other Conversations About Race* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 73-74.

⁹⁶ Mohanty, 2.

⁹⁷ Henry Giroux, *Border Crossings: Cultural Workers and the Politics of Education* (New York: Routledge, 1992), 28.

⁹⁸ Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths, and Helen Tiffin, *Post-Colonial Studies: The Key Concepts* (London: Routledge, 2000), 118.

⁹⁹ Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, 46.

a third, 'hybrid' species" that is marked by contradiction, ambivalence, and ambiguity.¹⁰⁰

While post-colonial theorists name sites of colonization as the genesis of the recognition of hybrid cultures and identities, some theorists claim that this hybridity is the mark of all cultural reality. Homi K. Bhabha writes:

It is only when we understand that all cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation, that we begin to understand why hierarchical claims to the inherent originality or 'purity' of cultures are untenable . . . It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that meaning and symbols have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew.¹⁰¹

Indeed, much like the concept of border-crossing identity that I am suggesting, the concepts of hybrid culture and hybrid identity will not allow for the tidy categories of either/or, superior/inferior, margin/center, privileged/oppressed. Rather, the recognition of a "Third Space of enunciation" means that culture, identity and meaning can be claimed and re-claimed, creating with new borders, new meanings, and new realities than those which formerly appeared impenetrable.

We cannot dissolve the borders that contain identities of privilege completely, as doing so would be a denial of the power that exists within those boundaries. Likewise, to simply invert the paradigm of oppressor/oppressed, so that the oppressed now act as the oppressor, maintains the dehumanizing dialectic we seek to challenge. Just as Freire notes that liberation for the oppressed involves the crafting of a new humanity so we can find a third way beyond the oppressor/oppressed dialectic, liberation for the privileged must include the crafting of a both/and identity that can both claim responsibility for the ways we live into dehumanizing dualistic categories, and can simultaneously construct

¹⁰⁰ Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin, 118.

¹⁰¹ Homi K. Bhabha, "Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences," in *The Post-Colonial Studies Reader*, ed. Ashcroft, Griffiths, and Tiffin (London: Routledge, 2000), 208.

identity out of the ambiguity and contradictions of living in solidarity with the oppressed in ways that transcend these categories. A study of persons who have embodied and articulated border-crossing identities might help us to begin to do so.

Gloria Anzaldúa: La Frontera

Gloria Anzaldúa provides a helpful account of how one's physical and cultural space affects the crafting of identity, demonstrating how her own identity construction seeks to transform the either/or dualisms of race, class, gender, and citizenship present along the U.S./Mexico border. Anzaldúa calls the physical space along the Rio Grande River valley in South Texas, *La Frontera*,¹⁰² a place "where the Third World grates against the first and bleeds."¹⁰³ This is a literal borderland where crossing over from one country into another and the reinforcement of those borders in acts of deportation are commonplace. This is a border culture that blends two worlds, with a "steel curtain" as its dividing line.¹⁰⁴

As an inhabitant of this borderland, Anzaldúa is concerned with the ways that the intersection of borders creates physical, psychological, sexual, and spiritual contradictions. She seeks to articulate an identity that resembles the contradictions of this space, one that is "shifting and multiple . . . on the borders and in the margins."¹⁰⁵ This is a border identity that is derived from and seeks to transcend the dualisms of ethnicity and

¹⁰² Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderlands: The New Mestiza = La Frontera*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999).

¹⁰³ Anzaldúa, 25.

¹⁰⁴ Gloria Anzaldúa, preface to the first edition of *Borderlands: The New Mestiza = La Frontera*, 2nd ed. (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1999).

¹⁰⁵ Anzaldúa, preface.

culture that maintain the dualism of Anglo/Mexican, Christian/savage (Indian), citizen/illegal. This identity is “*una cultura mestiza*,” a mixed identity.¹⁰⁶

Anzaldúa disrupts the dominant male/female duality that designates women’s roles only in relation to men—the roles of mother, nun, or prostitute—by claiming a lesbian identity.¹⁰⁷ While she states that for many persons being homosexual is a genetic reality, for her being lesbian was a choice, “a way of balancing, of mitigating duality.”¹⁰⁸ In this way, she situates herself within the “sexual borderlands,” as a lesbian who has chosen to place herself outside of the dominant discourse around sexuality in both Mexican and Anglo culture, and in the discourse around the dualistic gender roles of man/woman.¹⁰⁹

Anzaldúa also challenges the dualisms that are present in the discourse of Catholic and Protestant religion, which encourage a body/spirit split, one that assists in objectifying the body as something to renounce, denies the spirit worlds and supernatural elements present in indigenous religiosity as cultic or witchcraft, and places the primacy of religious experience upon cognitive reasoning. For Anzaldúa, the kind of dichotomous objectification of indigenous peoples and their religiosity that is reflected in the anthropological study of religion is a part of the subject/object dualism that is the “root of all violence:”

White anthropologists claim that Indians have “primitive” and therefore deficient minds, that we cannot think in the higher mode of consciousness—rationality. They are fascinated by what they call the “magical mind,” the “savage” mind, the *participation mystique* of the mind that says the world of the imagination—the world of the soul—and of the spirit is just as real as physical reality. In trying to

¹⁰⁶ Anzaldúa, 44.

¹⁰⁷ Anzaldúa, 39.

¹⁰⁸ Anzaldúa, 41.

¹⁰⁹ Anzaldúa, 41.

become “objective,” Western culture made “objects” of things and people when it distanced itself from them, thereby losing “touch” with them.¹¹⁰

Anzaldúa describes a consciousness that develops when one inhabits the colonized space where Anglo and Mexican cultures and Christian and indigenous worldviews and spiritualities intersect: “. . . People who inhabit both realities are forced to live in the interface between the two, forced to become adept at switching modes.”¹¹¹ This ability to switch modes, to think and identify in more than one way—which includes the ability to see deeper, more imaginative realities beyond the dominant discourse of white, rationalistic thinking—Anzaldúa calls *la facultad*.¹¹² She states that this ability to break past the dominant discourse that we have been socialized to internalize allows for an imaginative, rebellious reconstruction of identity and spirituality.

This ability, she says, is particularly strong for those who are designated as deviant and different. The experience of difference, of inhabiting a consciousness beyond the dominant cultural reality, “when not brutalized into sensitivity,”¹¹³ allows one to think beyond the dominant discourse. *La facultad*, “anything that breaks into one’s everyday mode of perception, that causes a break in one’s defenses and resistance, anything that takes one from one’s habitual grounding, causes the depths to open up, causes a shift in perception” provides the means for a third way of identity construction.¹¹⁴ “We lose something in this mode of initiation, something is taken from us: our innocence, our unknowing ways, our safe and easy ignorance. . . . Confronting anything that tears the fabric of our everyday mode of consciousness and that thrusts us

¹¹⁰ Anzaldúa, 59.

¹¹¹ Anzaldúa, 59.

¹¹² Anzaldúa, 60.

¹¹³ Anzaldúa, 60.

¹¹⁴ Anzaldúa, 60-61.

into a less literal and more psychic sense of reality increases awareness and *la facultad*.¹¹⁵

For Anzaldúa, experiencing life on the physical borderlands and at the intersection of cultures allows her a critical view of the socializing forces of dominant culture. Her location on the borders of space and cultures becomes a gift, an opportunity to identify contradictions that the dominant culture cannot see, and to craft a new identity and a new culture:

As a *mestiza* I have no country, my homeland cast me out; yet all countries are mine because I am every woman's sister or potential lover. (As a lesbian I have no race, my own people disclaim me; but I am all races because there is the queer of me in all races.) I am cultureless because, as a feminist, I challenge the collective cultural/religious male-derived beliefs of Indo-Hispanics and Anglos; yet I am cultured because I am participating in the creation of yet another culture, a new story to explain the world and our participation in it.¹¹⁶

Though Anzaldúa lives on the U.S. side of the Texas/Mexico border, and navigated a vocational path that allowed her to attain greater capital because of her advanced education, she has chosen to critically examine and identify with the experiences of violence and marginalization that are present in *La Frontera*. Because of this identification, she hones *la facultad*, the capacity to imagine an identity beyond the either/or constructs around which the borders are constructed, to re-craft how her own identity might be constructed in ways that are derived from the cultures of the border but resist the dominating practices therein.

Jung Young Lee: Marginality

As an Asian-American, Jung Young Lee is concerned with the borders of margin and center and the ways that this dualism creates the "marginal person . . . the individual

¹¹⁵ Anzaldúa, 61.

¹¹⁶ Anzaldúa, 102-103.

who lives in two societies or cultures and is a member of neither.”¹¹⁷ Lee seeks to shift from a vision of American society as a “two-category system” which cites people of color with a failure to assimilate to the dominant white culture,¹¹⁸ toward a vision of America as a pluralistic society, “a mosaic of harmony of different racial/ethnic groups” co-existing together.¹¹⁹

Lee says that Northeast Asian-Americans—Chinese-Americans, Japanese-Americans, and Korean-Americans—share some common experiences of marginalization in relation to the two-category system, engendering a particular consciousness of marginality (though he says that other groups experience marginality as well, but in different ways at different intersections of social identity that that of race and ethnicity). Lee locates the genesis of this marginality in the migration of these three groups to find work in the United States. In the process of migration, all three groups encountered pressure to assimilate to the norms of the dominant Euro-American center, to join the “melting pot” of American immigrants whose core cultural identities are expected to melt away toward assimilation into the dominant way of life. In the maintenance of Asian cultural norms such as language, food, and a collectivist social orientation, these three groups were cited with an inability to assimilate, and were met with cultural and racial stereotypes and bias.¹²⁰ The particular discrimination that Asian-Americans face, a “stereotypic image of Oriental-Americans,” Lee says, limits social mobility.¹²¹

¹¹⁷ Jung Young Lee, *Marginality: The Key to Multicultural Theology* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1995), 43-44.

¹¹⁸ Lee, 40.

¹¹⁹ Lee, 38.

¹²⁰ Lee, 26.

¹²¹ Lee, 26.

Lee locates the dualistic margin/center in the assimilationist, “Melting Pot” model of American society, stating that the pressure of cultural assimilation means that persons are “socialized to think from the center.”¹²² As an alternative to the assimilationist model of American society, Lee seeks to “restore balance,”¹²³ to the heavy weight we place upon the center by crafting a “new marginality” that both recognizes the marginalized identity as oriented within the margin/center dualism, yet seeks to transcend the polarity of that dualism.

In building an understanding of marginality that exists both within the margin/center dualism and seeks to transcend it, Lee identifies three ways to think about identity as a marginal person. He describes the “in-between” marginal person as the negative conception of marginality in the United States, the one associated with expectations of assimilation that maintain the polarity of center and margin. Lee describes the inner monologue of the in-between marginal person as such:

I am unwanted by both worlds, yet I live in them. That is why I am an absurd creature. I am supposed to be a part of this Caucasian-American society, but I do not really belong to it because of the way I look, speak, and behave. The more closely I identify myself with my Caucasian friends, the more I feel alienated from them. I go back to my ancestral land, which has changed in its own way, and it has become a strange place. Moreover, I have changed by adopting the American lifestyle, and this exacerbates by reception back into the Korean culture as Asian. I am part of two worlds, without wholly belonging to either.¹²⁴

To be in-between two cultures, says Lee, “is to be fully neither,” to be neither Asian nor American (the inverse, of the either/or dialectic).¹²⁵ This non-being, not able to identify with or be accepted by either culture, Lee identifies as the “root of dehumanization.”¹²⁶

¹²² Lee, 30.

¹²³ Lee, 32.

¹²⁴ Lee, 44.

¹²⁵ Lee, 45.

¹²⁶ Lee, 45.

The second definition of marginality that Lee proposes is an “in-both” identity. This he claims is a more positive self-understanding, grounded in a pluralistic social reality. This is a self-understanding that embraces both aspects of one’s border identity, but also pushes beyond the inner reclamation of identity to include the “appreciation of other skin colors.”¹²⁷ This in-both model of marginality is “self-affirming,” it re-claims an interior consonance with one’s multiple cultural identities, instead of seeking external cultural validation for one’s worth.¹²⁸ Lee writes:

The power structure established along racial lines must be redrawn or abolished, and the idea of a melting-pot society based on Caucasian supremacy must be replaced by a broader pluralistic thrust. In this new age, we, ethnic minorities, take pride in our roots and take seriously our potential to determine our destinies. We don’t want to be told by the central group who we are and who we should be. As marginal people, we will define ourselves. This is the beginning of our contemporary self-understanding of marginality.¹²⁹

Thus, at the same time that the in-both marginal identity claims an internal appreciation of self, this person also externalizes this appreciation of self toward an appreciation of the cultural differences present in others. This is relational embodiment of Lee’s vision of a pluralistic mosaic, one in which all Americans experience marginality as a result of being in both internal consonance with one’s own cultural identity and in appreciation of the multitude of difference present in American society. He writes, “So every American is a marginal person who lives in both or multiple worlds by simply being a part of this pluralistic society. Therefore, marginality imposes a new reality that transcends marginalization, for it means to be truly in both or in all worlds.”¹³⁰

¹²⁷ Lee, 45.

¹²⁸ Lee, 47.

¹²⁹ Lee, 48.

¹³⁰ Lee, 53.

Though Lee has achieved some balance as he moves from in-between to in-both—balancing external validation with the internal consonance in the construction of identity, and in shifting from an assimilationist vision of society toward a pluralistic vision—Lee pushes marginality one step farther, “in-beyond.” This third way of marginality is a holistic vision, says Lee, one that seeks to “reconcile marginality and centrality . . . to be in-between and in-both simultaneously,” and to create a new kind of center, based upon marginality itself.¹³¹ Because the melting pot ideal is both “unrealistic and undesirable,”¹³² yet is a consistent historical reality, Lee says that experiences of in-between marginality can never be fully dismantled in a context in which diverse cultural realities intersect.¹³³ Thus, he says, though the vision of a pluralistic society is present in history and unfolding before us, the historical reality of assimilation means that we cannot divest completely of the need, at times, to claim an either/or cultural identity, because “The resurgence of ethnic consciousness and indigenous cultural values challenges the dominant paradigm of assimilation.”¹³⁴ Likewise, Lee seeks to maintain the in-both conception of marginality, embracing a positive reclamation of the various, seemingly conflicting and divergent pieces of one’s identity. “I am more than an Asian because I am an American, and I am more than an American because I am an Asian. . . . To be in-both is as authentic as to be in-between.”¹³⁵

Despite the fact that marginal people are not fully accepted by the various cultural worlds that shape their identities, Lee says that those on the margins cannot fully escape the ways that these cultures shape their identities. He says that a third way of marginality

¹³¹ Lee, 59.

¹³² Lee, 58.

¹³³ Lee, 58.

¹³⁴ Lee, 58.

¹³⁵ Lee, 58.

is “in-beyond,” at the same time in-between and in-both, finding a “creative core” located at the intersection or border where the cultures that construct identity meet. In-beyond is the “ability to be continuously creative.”

Creativity is a process of transformation from being to non-being, and from non-being to being, simultaneously; that is, the process of change from being in-between to being in-both, and from being in-both to being in-between at the same time. In such creativity, the mutual transformation between being in-between and being in-both takes place without ceasing to be each. . . . Thus, a new marginal person, whether male or female, whether white, black, yellow, or red, should bring a creative harmony to these negative and positive experiences, living in-beyond both worlds that marginalize them.¹³⁶

Virgilio Elizondo: A Universal Mestizaje

Virgilio Elizondo is a Catholic priest in San Antonio, Texas, who narrates his journey of moving from “a very secure experience of being, to one of non-being, to one of new-being,” in the crossing of the borders of Mexican and American, of privilege and oppression, and of spirituality and theology toward the construction of his *mestizo* identity.¹³⁷ *Mestizaje*, he says, is “the process through which two totally different peoples mix biologically and culturally so that a new people begins to emerge. . . .”¹³⁸ Elizondo’s own process toward understanding himself as *mestizo* involved encounters with family, institutions, history, and theology that would all contribute to the shaping of his identity.

Elizondo describes his early socialization and sense of identity as being grounded in a profound sense of being at home, “*en nuestra tierra*.”¹³⁹ Growing up in an American family with a strong sense pride in their Mexican identity, embedded in a

¹³⁶ Lee 63-64.

¹³⁷ Virgilio Elizondo, *The Future is Mestizo: Life Where Cultures Meet*, rev. ed. (Boulder University Press of Colorado, 2000), 18.

¹³⁸ Elizondo, 17.

¹³⁹ Elizondo, 4.

neighborhood in which his parent's local stores was a locus of networking and community support, Elizondo's core sense of identity was positive and unquestioning:

Being Mexican was the greatest gift of God's grace. We loved it, lived it, and celebrated it. In many ways, we felt sorry for the peoples who were not so lucky as to be Mexican. In those early years I never thought of myself as a native born U.S. citizen of Mexican descent. My U.S. identity was quite secondary to my Mexican identity. Yet I was happy living in the U.S.A. We belonged to this land called the United States, and this land belonged to us. In those early days, I never experienced being Mexican as not belonging. This was my home. I was born here and I belonged here.¹⁴⁰

Elizondo's first encounter with an institution that contributed to his socialization was grade school. In this setting he says he felt like a foreigner for the first time, "tolerated but not very welcome."¹⁴¹ He encountered strange tasting foods, reproach for speaking Spanish, and teachers and religious leaders who were stern and serious, unlike the religious of his Mexican community who were friendly and jovial.¹⁴² Not used to speaking English exclusively, he found school to be boring and unintelligible. "Going to school was so different that it was like crossing the border every day, even though it was only a few blocks from home."¹⁴³

In this environment, Elizondo describes his identity as "mixed up," of "being a foreigner in the very country in which I had been born and raised."¹⁴⁴ Elizondo carried a profound sense of responsibility toward his parents to succeed in this environment, yet he also carried a profound sense of alienation from the teachers and other children at school.¹⁴⁵ Dreaming, he says, was his survival mechanism, "My teachers were constantly getting after me for day-dreaming. That was my natural escape mechanism, or, better

¹⁴⁰ Elizondo, 12.

¹⁴¹ Elizondo, 15.

¹⁴² Elizondo, 15-16.

¹⁴³ Elizondo, 16.

¹⁴⁴ Elizondo, 16.

¹⁴⁵ Elizondo, 16.

yet, my instinct to survive. The dreams were my spontaneous efforts to create an existence of my own, thus refusing to accept the existence that was being imposed upon me.”¹⁴⁶ After school each day, Elizondo would cross back over from this world of non-being back into his community of being, “It was the beginning of life in two countries that were worlds apart.”¹⁴⁷

As the world broadened for Elizondo and he encountered more social settings beyond the dual settings of home and school, he was met with new contradictions that would challenge his sense of being and belonging. He names home as the space that informs his Mexican identity, and school as the place for shaping in him an Anglo identity.¹⁴⁸ Beyond home and school, seemingly mundane public spaces illuminated new contradictions. Thus, in public bathrooms that were designated for either Blacks or Whites, Elizondo was either too light-skinned or too dark-skinned to be provided access. He writes, “Our being was actually our ‘non-being.’”¹⁴⁹ This encounter with contradictions continued as Elizondo visited his family in Mexico. While in his community in the U.S. he always felt a grounded sense of Mexican identity, his family in Mexico called his family “*pochos* . . . Mexicans from the U.S.A.”¹⁵⁰ “Whether we were in Mexico or in the U.S. we are always the distant and different ‘other,’”¹⁵¹ It is during this time that Elizondo began to sit on the borders of being and non-being. He found confirmation and grounding in his home community in the face of a world of

¹⁴⁶ Elizondo, 16-17.

¹⁴⁷ Elizondo, 16.

¹⁴⁸ Elizondo, 23.

¹⁴⁹ Elizondo, 18.

¹⁵⁰ Elizondo, 20.

¹⁵¹ Elizondo, 20.

contradiction and rejection. In this border space, Elizondo is able to identify both the challenges and the opportunities of inhabiting this ambiguous reality:

I lived on the border between two nationalities. I was an insider-outsider to both. I was 'Mexican' in the U.S. and *gringo/pocho* in Mexico. There was a painful side to it, for it is difficult to always be different, but there was also an enjoyable side to it; I had a lot more options and could move easily in and out of two worlds.¹⁵²

In college and seminary and beyond, political realities began to influence Elizondo. During this time, as he encountered political movements to address deep economic inequities, including the farmworkers' struggle for humane treatment and fair wages, Elizondo reflected upon his own social standing and the ways he was called into political action:

My past experience, though many times difficult and painful, had generally speaking been positive in comparison to the multiple negative experiences of the majority of my people. I was not rich, materially speaking, but I was certainly privileged and well-off when it came to the many beautiful and positive experiences of my years of growing up. Yet that was all the more reason why I could not ignore the painful situation of the majority of my people.¹⁵³

To deepen his reflection upon these political inequities and his own social reality, Elizondo began to study the history of "oppression, rape, robbery, insult, murder, and exploitation," that have been inflicted upon the Mexican people in relation to and in the U.S. "History," he says, "is not merely the record of the past but the life-source of the present and the hidden energy for the new future."¹⁵⁴

The history of violence and oppression inflicted on the Mexican and Mexican-American people, combined with Elizondo's own experiences of the varied sources of racial and cultural segregation in the U.S., propelled him toward the construction of "new

¹⁵² Elizondo, 21.

¹⁵³ Elizondo, 34.

¹⁵⁴ Elizondo, 39.

being.” A significant piece of this quest for Elizondo involved the discovery of the socio-historical Jesus, a Jesus that was cultural outsider who crossed boundaries of culture, law, and propriety:

Jesus is . . . the rejected one who becomes the source of solidarity among the rejected of society. Through him, with him, and in him, the prostitutes, the tax collectors, the Samaritans (who stand for the rejected and despised neighbor), the public sinners of society, and all *hoi polloi* passed from being a faceless and nameless mass of individuals to a community of friends.¹⁵⁵

In the act of table fellowship, says Elizondo, Jesus crosses borders and divisions and invites us to cross and transcend the borders that confine our identities and relationships. Thus Elizondo finds the theological grounding for new-being, and calls this new being the “new *mestizaje* of the Southwest,” the multicultural and multi-linguistic Mexican-American people, people who embody the historical and contemporary contradictions of being both/and people.¹⁵⁶

The theological example of Jesus as *mestizo* motivates a larger vision for Elizondo, that of a “universal *mestizaje*.”¹⁵⁷ Borne out of his lived experiences in coalition-building that seek to transcend the dehumanizing boundaries of identity and culture that divide by embracing differences as an enriching source of new-being,¹⁵⁸ Elizondo presents his vision of the universal *mestizaje* as “a new phylum of human life,”¹⁵⁹ that is able to both “assume and transcend”¹⁶⁰ its various cultural identities and traditions, to be both “universal and local” in its consciousness and politics, and that is comfortable with migrations across the boundaries of space, culture, and identity.

¹⁵⁵ Elizondo, 79.

¹⁵⁶ Elizondo, 73.

¹⁵⁷ Elizondo, 87.

¹⁵⁸ Elizondo, 81.

¹⁵⁹ Elizondo, 101.

¹⁶⁰ Elizondo, 84.

Elizondo recognizes that this vision is not currently a reality, though he has seen glimpses of this reality. Harkening back to his days of non-being, in which dreaming was way to transcend his current reality, Elizondo states:

The future begins with a dream of what could and ought to be. When they are first announced, such dreams often appear as naïve, simplistic, impossible, destructive of good order, and heretical. Yet dreams are the sparks of discoveries that allow us to transcend the barriers of present-day limitations of life. . . . And so out of the suffering of my own people and experiences of the pain of some of the other peoples of the world who have also suffered marginalization, alienation, and rejection because of their racial or national background, I dare to dream of what could be and needs to be if humanity is to become a united family.¹⁶¹

Conclusion: A Vision for the Construction of Border-crossing Identity

By comparing the landmarks of identity construction embedded in the writings of these three border-crossers, we can begin to identify some of the basic attributes of these identities along with five elements that contribute to border-crossing identities, toward the possibility of identifying what a border-crossing consciousness might look like that has the objective of transforming identities of privilege.

The basic attributes of border-crossing identities include the ability to *handle contradiction*, to tolerate a certain level of ambiguity of meaning and truth. Self-understanding is not found in identification with one particular group, but rather involves a *choice to identify with multiple groups* and then to construct an inner reality that is not indicative of any one particular group. This identity must be *multi-vocal*, including the ability to speak in many languages, drawing upon many systems of meaning. This requires the ability to code-switch, to know the language and symbolic codes of the different groups that compose one's identity, to be able to identify which codes are operative in which settings, and to communicate using the particular codes of that culture

¹⁶¹ Elizondo, 87 and 88.

as an insider while at the same time holding the ability to name those aspects of culture that still render one an outsider. In each case, in order to resist association with dualism, false purity, or violence, *the choice is made not to identify as an insider*. In this sense, each writer *sees border-crossing as both a gift and a challenge* – at once always an insider and outsider, but always with a *third eye* to identify and name the contradictions that remain unseen to insiders.

The first of the five elements that these writers share that contribute to the construct of border-crossing identity include *specific contexts and encounters* that have contributed to the construction of their identities as both/and people. Each writer names as a significant source that contributes to their identity construction a particular physical space in North America at which the borders of different cultures meet. While Lee describes the macro intersection of Asian and American found in multiple spaces of immigration to North America, Anzaldúa and Elizondo name the particular border spaces where Mexican immigrants meet North American values and norms. These are all spaces of socialization—encounters with family, education, the workforce, and religious community—where the writers are able to name the ways they are both grounded in and challenged by the contradictions of dominant North American culture, and a particular marginal culture.

Second, the writers reviewed in this chapter each *connect identity to the history of oppression* that exists at the intersection the dominant and marginal cultures present in their realities. For example, Lee names the ways that the history of Asian migration to the United States, and the pressure to assimilate to dominant American culture, contribute to construction of the marginal consciousness. Elizondo undertakes a study of the history

of the exploitation of Mexican people in the United States, and incorporates this history into the development of his concept of the universal *mestizaje*. Anzaldúa's *mestiza* identity is influenced by the history of cultural genocide of indigenous peoples in the Americas, as well as the ongoing history of violence enacted upon non-citizen inhabitants of *La Frontera*. In each case, the history of oppression that accompanies habitation and engagement of American culture influences the border-crossing identity.

Third, each of these writers is able to name the ways that *identification with both privilege and oppression* contribute to the shaping of who they are. This is a decentering hermeneutic, where these people do not fully identify themselves with either center or margin, privileged or oppressed, but rather construct identities that are shaped by both realities. For example, while Lee recognizes that the feelings of marginalization associated with the in-between consciousness are a legitimate part of the shaping of identity for many Asian Americans, he extends his identification to include both an appreciation for the sources of his cultural identity as well as the sources of the cultural identities of others, including those who identify with the cultural center. In this way, Lee seeks to be "in both," identifying both with marginality and with centrality.

Fourth, each writer seeks not only to name and claim the ways that these social categories contribute to their identities without seeking to escape them, they also work to *construct an understanding of identity that transcends or moves beyond this core dualism*. Each person is more than the dual forces that meet in border spaces. Lee's identity of marginality is in-beyond the dual forces of center/margin that construct the in-between and in-both identities. In-beyond still recognizes the forces of marginality and centrality that participate in identity construction, but is also part of a broader, pluralistic

cultural mosaic that seeks identification through encounter, appreciation, and internalization of multiple ways of being. Anzaldúa's *mestiza* identity consists not only of three cultural parts—Mexican, Anglo, and Indian—but also seeks to transform the gender categories of man/woman by claiming a lesbian identity.¹⁶² While Elizondo can identify both as insider and outsider as a Mexican American, he seeks to craft an identity that incorporates both, yet pushes past them, toward a “universal mestizaje” that is comfortable moving in between and across cultural groups, identifying with all groups and none of them at the same time.

Fifth, and finally, these writers cite *creativity and dreams* as a core source that makes this construction of a third way of identity possible. They each utilize the imagination, dreams, and *la facultad* to imagine a self and a world that transcends the dehumanizing dualisms of society and identity. In addition to the important roles of social encounter and of claiming the ways history contributes to self-understanding in constructing border-crossing identities, the role of imagination seems crucial to this process. Creative thinking, dreaming, and imagining alternatives to what is allow these writers to transcend the confines of internal and external borders, to construct new visions of self and community.

How do we assist people of privilege in tolerating ambiguity, in making a conscious choice to de-center themselves, and in resisting the core forces of socialization that maintain their privilege? This is tricky, because resisting these socialization practices means being potentially rejected by family and community. It means possibly uncovering ugly truths about history, meaning, and self that will make people of privilege very uncomfortable. Dismantling identities of privilege causes great cognitive, affective,

¹⁶² Anzaldúa, 41.

relational, and spiritual discomfort. What practices might we employ to assist us in addressing these multiple barriers to transformation, so that engagement with a Third Space of enunciation of self, social reality, and meaning becomes possible?

Chapter 3

Barriers to Identity Transformation and Possibilities for Conversion

Many educational approaches to personal and social transformation maintain that the primary work of dismantling privilege is the development of a critical understanding of the circumstances of privilege and oppression, and one's role in those circumstances. These approaches are essential to understanding the kind of cognitive shift necessary for addressing the root causes of privilege and oppression. However, these approaches often overlook the relational, affective, and spiritual dimensions associated with the kind of deep change that is necessary for sustained identity transformation.

In addition to a change in cognitive understanding, such change also includes shifts in relationships and networks of belonging, in the sense of identity and self-understanding, and in commitments to truth and ultimate meaning. Identity transformation for people with privilege includes disruptions and discomfort in affective, relational, and spiritual—as well as cognitive—dimensions of human experience, which often provide significant barriers to sustained and long-lasting change. The resources of religious education and spiritual formation—especially around the practice of conversion—can partner with critical pedagogies in helping to address this larger matrix of identity construction in transforming identities of privilege.

Barriers to Change for People with Privilege

Because our identities of privilege operate as unconscious patterns of behavior that society reinforces and rewards, disrupting these practices and their internalization is a challenging task. In a dominant society that rewards the practices of entitlement and domination that form our identities, there are no particular negative consequences for

maintaining one's privileged status. Rather, it is when these norms are challenged or resisted that one begins to feel the discomfort and rejection of no longer belonging.

Many scholars have noted the cognitive discomfort that is often felt when one encounters revelations of the dynamic of privilege and oppression. As Tatum describes in relation to white racial identity development, white people encountering revelations of systemic inequality and racial prejudice can experience a sense of cognitive dissonance, because their encounters with structural inequality challenge the myth of individual merit that has constructed their self-understandings.¹⁶³ Thus, understanding systems of inequality challenges privileged people's core thinking about how the world works, which can be very disruptive and lead to great discomfort.

Jean Piaget describes this dissonance in the process of learning as a loss of cognitive equilibrium. Piaget states that when new information is received via a person's encounter with a particular environment or source, the person seeks to incorporate the experience/information into her existing cognitive schemes (e.g. what she already knows). This organization of and adaptation to new information or new experience causes a lack of cognitive balance, during which the person must either "assimilate" the new information into existing cognitive schemes, or "accommodate" her cognitive schemes to meet the challenges of the new information, thus reaching a new state of equilibrium.¹⁶⁴ What is important about this is to realize that the tasks of encountering new information about systemic oppression, thinking critically about these realities, and seeking to understand these dynamics deeply is a process that which knocks one off

¹⁶³ Beverly Daniel Tatum, *"Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" And Other Conversations About Race* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 98.

¹⁶⁴ Jean Piaget and Bärbel Inhelder, *The Psychology of the Child*, trans. Helen Weaver (1969; repr., New York: Basic Books, 2000), 6.

balance in the cognitive sense, causing confusion, disbelief, and denial. In this sense, the dynamics of privilege and oppression can be hard to learn (though this is often a source of frustration for people who experience oppression every day, and can see it and sense it everywhere). Cognitive dissonance can cause great confusion, as one tries to reconcile new information with what one previously knew to be true.

This confusion can lead to disbelief, distortion of the information encountered, and even denial that the new information encountered represents any sense of truth. James Perkinson describes the denial that many whites express regarding the atrocities that are present in the history and current practice of white supremacy in America. He describes white discomfort with “dread” and the sort of myth-making among whites that relieves us of the discomfort of facing our wrongs:

It is the business of myths of origin to “humanize” ruptures, to explain the inexplicable experiences of duress and devilry that accompanies every culture’s attempts to survive. . . . The body of whiteness . . . dreads “dread” and refuses to lend it a body to speak through. Or rather it projects its dread onto the people it identifies as the living embodiments of “dreadfulness and tries to surrogate” the encounter through them.¹⁶⁵

Perkinson is describing here the compulsion by whites in America to deny or deflect attention upon the realities of white supremacy by relegating practices of domination to the level myth. In so doing, Perkinson states that white people are denying the dread associated with practices of domination while at the same time projecting that dread on those who have been historically dominated, marking them as the dreadful “other.” Perkinson’s account of how white people deal with the dread of domination signals just one of the ways that people with privilege seek to deny or deflect attention from the wrongs associated with practices of entitlement and domination. Often, without even

¹⁶⁵ James W. Perkinson, *White Theology: Outing Supremacy in Modernity* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 128.

being aware that they are doing so, such denials arise amidst revelations of the deep wrongs associated with domination, when the cognitive dissonance of assimilating the new information presented with one's representation of how the world works come into conflict. Should one persist with such an exploration, moments of discomfort are certain arise.

In the midst of encounters with the discomfort associated with revelations of historical and contemporary practices of domination in personal and social life, often feelings of guilt and shame ensue. These feelings comprise the *emotional, or affective toll* that is felt when a privileged person undertakes the project of identity transformation.¹⁶⁶ Guilt, in particular, is a feeling associated with a "wrongful deed,"¹⁶⁷ which can emerge when the history of and current practices of privilege and oppression, and our collusion with that system, are revealed.¹⁶⁸ Frances E. Kendall notes that when we are exposed to the pain associated with experiences of oppression, guilt often emerges as a sense of not knowing how to respond to or repair instances of injustice, or of responding out of a sense of obligation to do something about the problem.¹⁶⁹ Regardless of whether or not guilt results in inaction or in misguided action, it is a complex emotion that has self-serving ends, that is, the cessation of the discomfort felt when one encounters revelations of the pain associated with the dynamics of privilege and oppression.

¹⁶⁶ While many writers on privilege and oppression note that feelings shame and guilt are not productive to the work of disrupting privilege, these feelings nonetheless provide significant barriers to addressing the root causes of privilege and oppression as they are manifested the formation of habitus and identity construction. As such, it is important that we look at the sources of these feelings, and why people with privilege often choose to maintain their privileged status when encountering these feelings.

¹⁶⁷ Thandeka, *Learning to be White* (1999; repr., New York: Continuum, 2001), 13.

¹⁶⁸ Tatum, 97.

¹⁶⁹ Frances, E. Kendall, *Understanding White Privilege: Creating Pathways to Authentic Relationships Across Race* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 103.

Extending the conversation about guilt and shame, Thandeka notes that where guilt is a response to revelations of one's implicit or explicit collusion with the maintenance of the structures of privilege and oppression, shame is associated with the kind of internal betrayal that arises when one betrays one's own privileged identity and one's community of privileged people by establishing relationships and creating alliances with persons who are deemed "other." She claims the threat of isolation from loved ones is key in the socialization process of white identity development:

Such an act threatens emotional perdition: the loss of the affection of one's caretakers and or community of peers. The child and then the adult learn how to suppress such risky feelings of camaraderie with persons beyond the community's racial pale in order to decrease the possibility of being exiled from their own community.¹⁷⁰

Signaling the complex and interrelated nature of the emotional toll of identity transformation with the *relational risks* that are present, this can mean the loss of significant networks of care and support, of relationships that have been a part of the formation of who we know ourselves to be. The potential rejection by loved ones, by communities of support, and by networks of meaning is a source of motivation for a persons with privilege to maintain our privileged status by remaining silent, continuing to practice the habitus of entitlement and domination, and generally to collude with systemic oppression.

Furthermore, because privilege itself operates as an object in which to place faith, disrupting privilege and seeking identity transformation takes a *spiritual toll*, which can challenge one's sense of what is ultimately true, requiring a shift in the object of one's trust and faith. In his structural model of faith development, James Fowler teaches us that faith is a human activity of meaning-making that combines a sense of self (identity),

¹⁷⁰ Thandeka, 16.

of community, and of a search for that in which to ultimately place one's trust. Thus, for Fowler, the act of faith-making is not necessarily associated with a specific set of religious beliefs, doctrines, or activities (though he does name formal religions among the many forms of faith-based meaning-making, and often works within a Christian theological framework). Faith is, for Fowler, a larger, universal process of meaning making in communion with the self and with others. He defines faith as "the dynamic, patterned process by which we find life meaningful. . . . [Faith] is our way of finding coherence in and giving meaning to the multiple forces and relations that make up our lives. Faith is a person's way of seeing him- or herself in relation to others against a background of shared meaning and purpose."¹⁷¹

Providing support for the notion that a meaning system and source of identity construction such as privilege can be a source of meaning-making in which one can place a sense of faith-based trust, Fowler notes that there are a number of objects of faith in which persons place trust, some that take distorted forms that seek to anesthetize humankind from our finite nature.¹⁷² He writes:

. . . [F]or many, narcotization is the solution—forgetting, ignoring, or escaping, through consumption or distraction, the burdens of our finite vulnerability. Or, in the form most favored by a culture that believes its own distorted myths of individualism, there is the effort, through the acquisition of stuff, power, or "securities" or through achievements or relationships, to negate our vulnerability and outfox fate.¹⁷³

Though the habitus and identity of privilege would certainly count as a distortion of that in which persons place trust and in which they have faith, privilege is, indeed, a way to

¹⁷¹ James W. Fowler, *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development and the Quest for Meaning* (San Francisco: HarperCollins, 1981), 3-4.

¹⁷² James W. Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian: Adult Development and Christian Faith*, rev. ed. (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2000), 39-40.

¹⁷³ Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, 39-40.

make meaning of one's self in relation to others and in relation to one's sense of what is ultimately true, valuable, and trustworthy. Therefore, taking up the task of identity transformation involves a radical shift in where one places one's trust, and how one views that which is trustworthy and has meaning. An invitation to transform an identity of privilege is an invitation to deconstruct and reconstruct one of the centers of one's trust and faith. This can take an intense spiritual toll, as one seeks to re-inhabit a spiritual space of self-understanding, of God's intentions for the self, and of the nature and quality of one's relationships with others. In a situation in which one's core thinking, emotions, relationships, and spirituality are seemingly on assault, a common reaction is to seek sources of comfort, which can mean collapsing back into relationships and practices that reinforce one's identity of privilege and therefore reinforce the dynamic of privilege and oppression.

Education for Critical Thinking

Contributing to numerous theories and pedagogies of transformation that have as their foundation the cultivation of skills for critical reading and engaging social reality, Freire's "Pedagogy of the Oppressed" is the seminal pedagogical model advocating the development of critical thinking in the pursuit of transformation of the dynamics of privilege and oppression,. Grounded in Marxist critical theory and developed in the context of Brazilian "base communities" marked by poverty and illiteracy, Freire holds that an educational process in which the oppressed come to critical consciousness—or *conscientização*—through a process of interrelated dialogue and action facilitates critical

engagement of the dialectic of privilege and oppression, toward the pursuit of “humanization.”¹⁷⁴

Freire recognizes the fundamental and unique relationality and historicity of humanity, stating that human beings are unique in their ability for reflective action, or praxis, in relationship “*with* the world” (emphasis in original), as opposed to the opposite, dominant understanding of humans as objects existing “*in* the world.”¹⁷⁵ Related to this anthropology is an understanding of a world, and of reality, as in constant process or transformation; a reality that has been masked by the dominant ideology that would have us believe that reality is a static entity to which human beings as unchanging entities must either master or submit. It is this recognition that humans are in relationship with history and with the world that allows for the possibility for change in self and social circumstances.

Freire’s names dialogue as that “existential necessity”—unique to human beings—that provides the impetus for the educational process.¹⁷⁶ This dialogue occurs through a process of problem-posing, in which individuals’ skills for critical thinking are honed as they consider the dualistic contradictions of the dominant view of reality, presented in what Freire calls “limit situations.”¹⁷⁷ Thus, the oppressed, for Freire, must engage these dualistic, imposed limits in dialogue, actively working to name them and transform them, instead of passively accepting them as inherent truths. This active dialogue, naming and transforming what was previously understood as inherent truth, is the activity of critical thinking. Such dialogue, Freire says, leads to a wholeness that

¹⁷⁴ Paulo Freire, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, 30th anniversary edition, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (New York: Continuum, 1994, 1970), 26.

¹⁷⁵ Freire, 56.

¹⁷⁶ Freire, 69.

¹⁷⁷ Freire, 80.

cannot be found in the oppressor/oppressed dialectic, in which the oppressed must organize and unify in order to transform reality. Thus, writes Freire, “human beings emerge from the world, objectify it, and in so doing can understand it and transform it with their labor.”¹⁷⁸

Though Freire’s work is deeply significant for addressing the dynamics of privilege and oppression, it is important to remember that the purpose of Freire’s pedagogy is to impact the material realities of the poor, not to transform the lives of people with privilege (though an attendant hope of transforming identities of privilege is to impact the material realities of the poor). Therefore, as people seeking to address and transform identities of privilege, it is important that we not consume Freire’s pedagogy toward our own ends. Educational models based upon Freire’s action/reflection pedagogy are popular—even trendy—in privileged congregational settings. This can result in educational programs that are good at critical thinking and reflection about structural inequality, but that do not consider how these realities translate on the level of identity, and do not eventuate into transformative action. This is what I would consider consumption of Freire’s pedagogy, ending only in developing the critical thinking skills of the privileged, but having little material impact.

That said, there are important aspects of the philosophy behind Freire’s pedagogy that are very important when considering a model of transformation for people with privilege. First, is Freire’s assertion that human beings have an inherent ability toward reflective action in a world that is open to transformation and change. This is essential in inviting people with privilege to consider a world that is contrary to their dominant socialization. Second, Freire’s suggestion that being in the world is a dialogical activity

¹⁷⁸ Freire, 106.

is essential. This means that people with privilege cannot see themselves as individual movers in the world, disconnected from impacting the lives of other people near and distant, and from participation in social reproduction, including the reproduction of systems of social injustice. Finally, Freire's call to action is essential. Remember, this is "reflective" action that is motivated by critical thinking formed by posing problems about structural inequality and our part in that inequality. And, most importantly, this reflective action always results in further reflection, evaluating the efficacy of our actions, developing a more nuanced understanding of what is going on in the world and in our interactions with it, and reconsidering further action.

The Resources of Religious Education and Spiritual Formation

The resources of religious education and spiritual formation can partner with pedagogies for developing critical thinking in addressing the broader range of barriers to transformation for people with privilege that are discussed above. I understand religious education and spiritual formation as two, interrelated activities toward the exploration and formation of, and communion with, that which is ultimately true. As resources for creating spaces to critically consider that which is ultimately meaningful and true, religious education and spiritual formation can provide explicit pedagogies that place critical thinking about the humanity, community, and social systems in conversation with theological reflection (religious education), to discern God's call (spiritual formation) to partnership in engaging the needs of the world (reflective action). These resources include and extend beyond pedagogies for critical thinking, to include the ways humans form a sense of self, engage in communities of meaning and belonging, construct understandings of that which is ultimately meaningful and true, and seek to discern and

live out a sense of vocation. Thus, I believe, combined with the resources of pedagogies for critical thinking, the resources of religious education and spiritual formation are vital for addressing the cognitive, affective, relational, and spiritual barriers that often prohibit people with privilege from seeking the transformation of their identities and practices in ways that are meaningful and long-lasting.

The Potential of Conversion for Addressing Identity Change

I draw from religious education and spiritual formation to suggest that the religious practice of conversion has the potential to partner with educational models of critical consciousness raising/perspective transformation that might more fully address the dimensionality of human experience—cognitive, affective, relational, and spiritual—in transforming identities of privilege. As Fowler notes, faith is not simply a matter of cognition, of understanding. “Faith,” says Fowler, “. . . involves rationality and passionality; it involves knowing, valuing, and committing.”¹⁷⁹

Fowler notes that persons grow, change, or experience a conversion of faith as they experience dissonance-inducing encounters. “. . . [W]e reconstruct our *ways* of being in faith when we encounter disruptions or sources of dissonance in our personal and collective lives that our previous ways of making meaning cannot handle” [emphasis in original].¹⁸⁰ Fowler’s understanding of this reconstruction of faith as conversion is helpful in addressing the various dissonance-inducing dimensions of human experience that often provide barriers to sustained change. Fowler describes conversion as thus:

Conversion is a significant recentering of one’s previous or unconscious images of value and power, and the conscious adoption of a new set of master stories in

¹⁷⁹ Fowler, *Stages of Faith*, 272.

¹⁸⁰ Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, 114.

the commitment to reshape one's life in a new community of interpretation and action.¹⁸¹

As privilege functions as both an identity and a center of faith, conversion has the potential to operate as that which might address the dissonance-inducing passionality of adopting the hard task of transforming identities of privilege. I suggest, then, not that educational models of consciousness raising or perspective raising be replaced by religious educational models of conversion, but rather, that a religious education/spiritual formation pedagogy of conversion might enhance the passionate as well as the rational aspects of identity transformation in relation to privilege. This study, then, is intended as a starting point to the project of uniting these two educational models, by identifying the specific ways that people who have sought such a transformation have been about the process of conversion, pinpointing specifically what conversion means and what conversion looks like for persons seeking to transform identities of privilege.

A Note on Conversion, Coercion, and Power

I want to note here that, in the history of Christianity and in current religious practice, conversion has had dire consequences for dominated groups. Historically, there are many associations of conversion with cultural genocide and the conquest of tribal peoples. George E. Tinker describes cultural genocide as “the effective destruction of a people by systematically or systemically (intentionally or unintentionally to achieve other goals) destroying, eroding, or undermining the integrity of the cultural and system of values that defines a people and gives them life.”¹⁸² In the context of the cultural genocide of native peoples in the Americas, religious conversion has been used as a

¹⁸¹ Fowler, *Becoming Adult, Becoming Christian*, 281-282.

¹⁸² George E. Tinker, *Missionary Conquest: The Gospel and Native American Cultural Genocide* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 6.

coercive tool to gain political and economic power by wiping out the value and meaning systems of particular tribal groups. This practice of combined cultural, spiritual, and economic warfare served to virtually annihilate the cultural and religious practices of significant indigenous tribes, creating a combined climate of economic and spiritual dependence of tribal peoples upon white European conquerors, which continues to create systems of poverty and dependence still today.

More recently, the death-dealing consequences of such conversion practices as ex-gay ministries and physical and psychological conversion therapies have raised concern about practices of conversion among gay and lesbian persons. These approaches employ therapies such as shock treatments to the genitals, intense psychotherapy, and public spiritual shaming and humiliation in order to “cure” persons of homosexuality. While these approaches claim that sexual orientation is both a spiritual and mental disorder, a 2009 resolution of the American Psychological Association states that homosexuality cannot be changed, and that therapeutic attempts to do so can cause “depression and suicidal thoughts.”¹⁸³

These historical and contemporary realities of conversion require that we take seriously the great harm that can occur when conversion is utilized as a coercive activity aimed toward power and control. I do think, however, that conversion can be re-claimed as a constructive activity that can assist in transforming the very systems that it often reinforces. When conversion is re-thought as a constructive activity that includes encounter across lines of difference toward a vision of liberation of the structures,

¹⁸³ APA Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation, *Report of the Task Force on Appropriate Therapeutic Responses to Sexual Orientation* (Washington, DC: American Psychological Association, 2009), 42.

practices, and identities that create systems of oppression, I believe such a reclamation is possible.

Models of Conversion

A model of conversion that can impact sustained change—in the face of the many barriers and sources of dissonance associated with that change—is one that understands conversion as an *ongoing* process of transformation that includes a commitment to a new way of being in the world, a re-orientation toward a new center of meaning. Diane Austin-Broos describes conversion as a cultural passage “from and to,”¹⁸⁴ one that happens in the “interplay between religion and identity,”¹⁸⁵ during which persons seek “to reidentify, to learn, reorder, and reorient.”¹⁸⁶ While Austin-Broos claims that sudden, “comprehensive reform is an elusive goal,” she states that the type of “learning anew” associated with conversion “proceeds over time and requires a process of integrating knowledge and experience.”¹⁸⁷ Though an ideal of any conversion experience is a turning away from identifications and practices that are death-dealing and dehumanizing, Austin-Broos claims that it is not possible for one to break entirely from one’s previous life. In this sense, she says, conversion is “not a quest for utopia, but rather for habitus.”¹⁸⁸ Conversion, in this sense, is not about a sudden, total change, but a gradual, ongoing commitment to a new way of being that takes into serious consideration the identity, knowledge, and experiences that construct the totality of the converting person.

¹⁸⁴ Diane Austin-Broos, “The Anthropology of Conversion: An Introduction,” in *The Anthropology of Religious Conversion*, ed. Andrew Buckser and Stephen D. Glazier (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 2003), 3.

¹⁸⁵ Austin-Broos, 1.

¹⁸⁶ Austin-Broos, 2.

¹⁸⁷ Austin-Broos, 2.

¹⁸⁸ Austin-Broos, 2.

This understanding of conversion is helpful when considering the complex, ongoing temptations toward comfort associated with privilege, temptations that will continue exist for the privileged person—not only in the social environment, but also internally as one seeks to wrestle with the demons associated with temptations toward practices of entitlement and domination that operate as pieces of privileged identity. This is a model of conversion that supports the notion of converting away from the identity and habitus of privilege, toward an identity and habitus of border-crossing. It allows us to take responsibility for the acts of dehumanization associated with our identities and practices, and seeks processes of ongoing change that will allow us to become both/and people—people who can both recognize their identities and practices of privilege, resist temptations toward collusion with practices of privilege and our internalization of those practices in our identities, and who can empathize with identities and experiences of marginalization and oppression.

Talvacchia's "Conversion to the Other"

Kathleen Talvacchia, writing from the context of multicultural theological education, describes this type of conversion as "conversion to the other."¹⁸⁹ In a context in which her job is to teach to the needs and life experiences of students from multiple cultures, Talvacchia states that the work of a multicultural educator includes an inner awareness of *both* their identities and practices of power and privilege, *and* the places where they can identify and express solidarity with experiences of marginalization, thus creating the sort of both/and posture that we hope for in a conversion of away from an identity of privilege, toward an identity of border crosser. In this model of conversion,

¹⁸⁹ Kathleen Talvacchia, *Critical Minds and Discerning Hearts: A Spirituality of Multicultural Teaching* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003), 64.

Talvacchia says, it is critical that we unite head and heart,¹⁹⁰ engaging tools for critical social analysis and for empathic understanding, toward a solidarity with marginalized persons that allows us to seek mutual empowerment and flourishing.

This is a model of conversion embodied in “perceptive attentiveness,” in which critical thinking is employed to “exam[ine] the contradictions between what we think is true with what is true in experience.”¹⁹¹ It involves developing the tools for critical social analysis to understand the dynamics of our own social location as well as developing the critical tools for understanding how others experience structural inequality. This critical knowledge of power, self, and social location is a “primary prerequisite for being able to understand others.”

Talvacchia combines this critical, “head” knowledge with the “heart” knowledge of empathic understanding. Empathy, she says, is the ability to “understand the sources of our own oppression,”¹⁹² and at the same time to employ the skills of listening and understanding, so that we might more fully understand another’s experience of the world.¹⁹³ Echoing Collins’ concern that privilege and oppression not be viewed as dual poles of human experience, but as a “matrix of domination” in which we experience both privilege and oppression, Talvacchia claims that one of the ways we can connect most deeply in empathy for another’s’ suffering is to recall our own experiences of suffering.

She shares a story of her own, which illustrates this point. During a trip to Brazil, Talvacchia was prompted to reflect upon the privilege of her social location as a white, middle-class, North American in an encounter with a group of women working to

¹⁹⁰ Talvacchia, 7-8.

¹⁹¹ Talvacchia, 30.

¹⁹² Talvacchia, 42.

¹⁹³ Talvacchia, 41.

empower Brazilian women who work as prostitutes. Talvacchia found herself passing judgment on these women, who saw prostitution as a viable professional option in a society and economic structure in which poverty was the norm and choices about money and profession were limited. As Talvacchia wrestled with her own feelings of judgment toward these women, she suddenly exclaimed:

Suddenly, I realized as I sat there that this type of judgment had often been leveled at me as a lesbian woman. I immediately felt in my heart the pain of that judgment. The significance of this insight was so vividly clear that I almost exclaimed aloud! I was doing to the speaker what had been done to me. I had the experience of being met with preexisting judgments from people about the morality of a lesbian orientation and life, without those people really bothering to hear my story or get to know me. Suddenly, I began to hear this woman's story with new ears. . . . As I later reflected upon this insight, I realized that my own experience of discrimination, and the pain that I have experienced from it, opened me up to hear the speaker's story in a way I could not before. . . . I realized that this knowledge, on both a cognitive and affective level, helped me to hear the speaker's story with greater empathy and understanding.¹⁹⁴

Empathy here is its own kind of both/and experience, for we cannot understand the experience of another's pain without understanding the sources of our own pain, which, in turn, helps to more fully reveal our identities and practices of privilege. She writes:

The danger of an inability to deal with our own pain is the risk that we will let those with whom we want to be in solidarity to "bleed" for us, rather than doing our own work to resolve the pain. . . . We understand our suffering better when we understand others' suffering and when we work to be in solidarity with them.¹⁹⁵

Empathy, she says, is not "an excuse to appropriate [another's experience] and make it our own."¹⁹⁶ Rather, in the context of transformation of identities of privilege, our job is to understand the sources of our own pain and alienation that lure us toward creating

¹⁹⁴ Talvacchia, 20-21.

¹⁹⁵ Talvacchia, 44.

¹⁹⁶ Talvacchia, 41.

privilege as an object in which to have faith, in which to express an identity, and in turn to express entitlement and domination of others. Only then can we begin to understand with an empathic heart the experiences of marginalization and oppression of those around us. This, says Talvacchia, is “conversion to the other.” In the face of the “jarring, unsettling, confusing” dissonance that often ensues when we face encounters with the other, Talvacchia claims that conversion is a posture that allows us “to turn away from fear of the other who is different and turn toward acceptance of differing worldviews and experiences,”¹⁹⁷ to push beyond the “blindness of our own privilege, “and to “listen and understand the experiences of others by hearing their stories.”¹⁹⁸

The result of conversion is not simply a shift in cognitive insight or understanding. This shift must include a joining in solidarity with others toward the liberation of those who are marginalized and oppressed. Talvacchia calls this “acting differently . . . aligning one’s self with the targeted group.”¹⁹⁹ In the context of multicultural theological education, this means a broadening the diversity of voices both in subject matter, in what is considered valid sources of knowledge, and in who is invited to speak in pedagogical design and in the classroom. More broadly, however, she describes “learning to act differently” as a process of “forming convictions and living out of them in an integrated way” through a process of “analytic rigor and spiritual reflection.”²⁰⁰

¹⁹⁷ Talvacchia, 65.

¹⁹⁸ Talvacchia, 66.

¹⁹⁹ Talvacchia, 75.

²⁰⁰ Talvacchia, 80.

Conde-Frazier's Borderland Spaces

Elizabeth Conde-Frazier also provides a helpful vision for thinking about how we can convert from identities of privilege toward identities of border-crossing. Writing from the context of multicultural Christian religious education, Conde-Frazier's vision of conversion views the encounter that occurs in multicultural spaces as a starting point for conversion. For Conde-Frazier, conversion begins in the act of border-crossing, "creating a borderland space for the discovery of mutuality and common ground."²⁰¹ Borderland spaces, says Conde-Frazier, are not comfortable zones of encounter, but rather, "spaces of risk . . . [places where we hear] multiple voices, at times with conflicting messages."²⁰²

This borderland space of conversion, says Conde-Frazier, is a space that provokes a conversion that is personal, cultural, and social. "The cultural and social elements involve social institutions and mechanisms. The personal component involves the intrapersonal dynamics of the person. The religious dimension relates to the influence of God."²⁰³ In the midst of these various dimensions of conversion, Conde-Frazier names the sharing of stories and experiences (conflicting though they may be) to be the avenue for exploring "symbols and experiences to . . . build new paradigms."²⁰⁴ Through the sharing of stories, Conde-Frazier says that "breakthrough" can occur.²⁰⁵ This breakthrough is often a revelation that the world does not actually work as it may appear

²⁰¹ Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, "Prejudice and Conversion," in Conde-Frazier, Kang, and Parrett, *A Many Colored Kingdom: Multicultural Dynamics for Spiritual Formation*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 105.

²⁰² Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, "From Hospitality to Shalom," in Conde-Frazier, Kang, and Parrett, *A Many Colored Kingdom: Multicultural Dynamics for Spiritual Formation*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 176-177.

²⁰³ Conde-Frazier, "Prejudice and Conversion," 113.

²⁰⁴ Conde-Frazier, "Prejudice and Conversion," 114.

²⁰⁵ Conde-Frazier, "Prejudice and Conversion," 115.

to us, that the conflicting truths we're receiving via another's story might actually represent an alternative vision of reality and reveal a previously unknowable truth.

Echoing the notion that conversion is an ongoing process of change, Conde-Frazier notes that "breakthrough is only one point in the progression."²⁰⁶ Like Talvacchia, Conde-Frazier employs grace, and combines it with the concept of truth, as that which can animate and sustain long-term change. When we open ourselves to borderland spaces of risk, where storytelling emerges as the tool through which new forms of understanding come into view, "truth breaks in on one in a continuous way, awakening the need to express oneself by way of new actions."²⁰⁷ These actions, she says, become "proof of the transforming power of the gospel as they are initiated and carried out by God's grace."²⁰⁸ The goal, then, for Conde-Frazier is to join in "radical action" with liberationists, "to participate in the struggle for liberation of those who are oppressed by or of those who suffer and die for want of human dignity. Conversion is both an announcement as well as a transforming action whose focus is the fulfillment of the kingdom."²⁰⁹

Talvacchia's and Conde-Frazier's offerings on conversion provide a number of helpful visions for why and how conversion might be helpful for transforming identities of privilege. First, they both offer a vision of conversion – and of education toward conversion – that includes and then expands upon cognitive understandings of the structural dimensions of inequality. For both authors, critical thinking is essential, but must be combined with relationship, with empathy, with emotion, and with spirituality if

²⁰⁶ Conde-Frazier, "Prejudice and Conversion," 115.

²⁰⁷ Conde-Frazier, "Prejudice and Conversion," 116.

²⁰⁸ Conde-Frazier, "Prejudice and Conversion," 116.

²⁰⁹ Conde-Frazier, "Prejudice and Conversion," 116.

sustained conversion is to occur. Border spaces of encounter and risk are essential for both authors, as it is in these spaces where truths emerge that have not appeared to us before, allowing for a new tolerance for ambiguity and a new consideration of reality. In this understanding of conversion, the presence of grace as that which makes possible a sustained commitment to risk, discomfort, change, and liberating action.

It seems possible that the grace that both Talvacchia and Conde-Frazier describe becomes the privileged persons' new object in which to place faith during the process of conversion. It is not that we place our confidence and trust directly in experiences of discomfort—as transforming as they may be—but, rather, in grace as that which animates the ongoing conversion that allows us to work through discomfort. Spaces of encounter—uniting critical thinking with empathic relational sharing and knowing—provide the container for the presence of grace to arise and to animate critical reflection, the sharing stories of pain, the rising of revelations of truth and expressions of empathy, and sustained, liberating action. This vision is helpful as we move forward to listen to the stories of persons with privilege, who have sought a conversion toward an identity of border-crossing.

Rambo and Farhadian's Heuristic

Building upon Talvacchia's and Conde-Frazier's conceptual understandings of conversion, it is helpful to have a structure that might provide a starting point for comparison when reflecting upon and making sense of the stories we will hear in the qualitative portion of this study. Rambo and Farhadian, studying conversion from an

anthropological perspective, provide a helpful structure for such a comparison/conversion.²¹⁰

Rambo and Farhadian define conversion as a “religious change”²¹¹ which emerges as both a process and a progression, involving a number of dimensions of experience, including “people, events, ideologies, institutions, expectations, and experiences.”²¹² Combining anthropological, sociological, psychological, and religious studies, they have identified a heuristic (a way of systematically identifying and organizing) that reflects the various stages that often occur in the process of conversion.²¹³ Though they do claim that some or all of these stages emerge in the process of conversion, Rambo and Farhadian note that this progression is neither linear nor universal in nature.²¹⁴ Rather, they suggest that persons undergoing processes of conversion might move back and forth through these stages, that the process of conversion is often “multiple, interactive, and cumulative.”²¹⁵

Rambo and Farhadian’s stages of conversion including the following: crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment, and consequences. They claim that every conversion emerges in a context with three levels: the macrocontext, the microcontext, and the mesocontext.²¹⁶ These various contexts combine to serve as the institutional (macro), personal and interpersonal (micro), and local contexts (meso) which interact to

²¹⁰ Lewis R. Rambo and Charles E. Farhadian, “Converting: Stages of Religious Change,” in *Religious Conversion: Contemporary Practices and Controversies*, ed. Christopher Lamb and M. Darrol Bryant (New York: Cassell, 1999), 23.

²¹¹ Rambo and Farhadian, 23.

²¹² Rambo and Farhadian, 24.

²¹³ Rambo and Farhadian, 24.

²¹⁴ Rambo and Farhadian, 24.

²¹⁵ Rambo and Farhadian, 24.

²¹⁶ Rambo and Farhadian, 24.

comprise the “total environment of religious change.”²¹⁷ I would add that these contexts interact together to create a particular habitus, and interact with the person’s internal sense of self and belonging to create identity.

Echoing to the dissonance and discomfort described by Tatum, Piaget, Talvacchia, and Conde-Frazier, Rambo and Farhadian say that conversion is prompted by a particular *crisis*, or “catalyst for change.”²¹⁸ They describe crises as the “disordering and disrupting experiences that call into question a person’s or group’s taken for granted world.”²¹⁹ Interacting with this crisis is a particular *quest*, a “searching for salvation,” which will allow the converting person to resolve the particular crisis.²²⁰ This quest often results in a new *encounter*, one in which the converting person explores alternatives or new ways of being.²²¹ When crisis provokes encounter, Rambo and Farhadian say that “contact between the potential convert and [an] advocate or proselytizer” for a new way of being may emerge.²²² While often encounter happens following a particular crisis, and includes search for new ways of being, the authors note that encounter can also precede crisis, triggering the dissonance that provokes a quest for salvation.²²³

Interaction follows, during which exploration, learning, decision-making, and creating of new identities and practices occurs. Rambo and Farhadian name a number of different sources can “immerse the convert or group into the new religious option.”²²⁴ These sources can include ritual engagement with a religious tradition, relationships or “networks of transformation,” rhetoric or “incorporating . . . into the language of

²¹⁷ Rambo and Farhadian, 24.

²¹⁸ Rambo and Farhadian, 25.

²¹⁹ Rambo and Farhadian, 25.

²²⁰ Rambo and Farhadian, 27.

²²¹ Rambo and Farhadian, 28.

²²² Rambo and Farhadian, 28.

²²³ Rambo and Farhadian, 28.

²²⁴ Rambo and Farhadian, 30.

transformation inherent to the . . . group,” and roles or “learning roles and conduct required.”²²⁵ Through interaction with these various sources, a new *commitment* occurs, during which a decision is made to surrender to a new spiritual orientation or identity emerges. This commitment is often embodied in a public demonstration of change, sometimes occurring as a testimony or narrative, encapsulated in rituals that “help consolidate a convert’s beliefs and involvement in a group.”²²⁶ Finally, this commitment is followed by a particular set of *consequences*. These consequences are the ways that life must be re-ordered so that the commitment professed can be carried out in belief and behavior. “For converting to be authentic,” say Rambo and Farhadian, “. . . converts must change aspects of their life according to the prescriptions and proscriptions of specific religious communities.”²²⁷

Conclusion: A Vision for Conversion

Talvacchia, Conde-Frazier, and Rambo and Farhadian helpful structure for reflection and comparison when seeking to understand what conversion might look like for people converting away from identities of privilege, toward identities as border-crossers. Though the processes of conversion described by the participants of our study do not exactly match the stages of conversion as described by Rambo and Farhadian, their stories do suggest that there is some validity in the various stages of their heuristic, and provide adjustments to that heuristic based upon the structure of conversion in the particular context of conversion from identities of privilege toward identities of border-crossing.

²²⁵ Rambo and Farhadian, 30.

²²⁶ Rambo and Farhadian, 32.

²²⁷ Rambo and Farhadian, 32.

Further, while Talvacchia and Conde-Frazier are not working solely with the problem of transforming identities of privilege via pedagogical practices of conversion, both authors include the cognitive and spiritual transformation of people with privilege as a significant piece of the spaces of multicultural engagement and liberation that they are concerned with constructing. In many ways, the stories we will hear will echo the concerns for liberation and the details of conversion as described by these authors, providing detailed accounts of what such a conversion means and what it looks like in practice.

Chapter 4

Qualitative Insights: Conversion from Privilege to Border-crossing

We turn now to the stories of people who have sought a transformation of identity from privilege to border-crossing. While the respondents in this study offered single narratives of their life histories, no one life history is told in full. Rather, I am drawing out pieces of their narratives in order to identify larger patterns of identity construction and transformation for people with privilege. At each stage of this description I will offer brief snapshots of the lives and experiences of these people as told in their interviews to craft a larger vision of what the construction of border-crossing identities and conversion might look like.

We will begin by learning a bit about the border-crossing work that the research participants do, as sustained work in a setting of cultural border-crossing is a significant piece of the criteria for inclusion in this study. We will then hear about how these people understand their identities of privilege and how those identities are made apparent to them in everyday life. After this brief introduction, we will begin to learn about how these people's privileged identities were disrupted, and how a process of conversion contributed to this change. Finally, we will hear how these people understand themselves as border-crossers and compare this conception of border-crossing with that offered by the writers in Chapter Two.

Nature of Work

The majority of the participants in this study work in non-profit or parish ministry settings, dealing with poverty, lower income, and/or social justice issues. Laura serves as

program director for an interfaith ministry network in Denver, Colorado called “Growing Home.” Responsible for providing program development and supervision, Laura partners together with a team of bilingual staff to provide shelter and food to homeless families and to offer a number of early intervention programs for the healthy development of children living in poverty in the city. Likewise, Clint and Courtney serve as co-executive directors of “Matthew 25 Ministry Hub” in Cedar Rapids, Iowa. Matthew 25 is a ministry of the United Methodist Church that provides neighborhood and community building services to low-income and flood affected areas of Cedar Rapids. Working directly with members of the community to identify program priorities and neighborhood needs, these two brothers also advocate for Matthew 25’s clients by interfacing with community leaders to establish networks of support for their programs.

Another set of the study’s participants serve as denominational leaders and consultants for the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA), responsible for social justice and multicultural ministries. Josie, for example, describes her work as “bridging the gap between social change and faith formation, spiritual discipline and accompanying congregations/clergy/leaders in their personal and institutional journeys to wholeness.” She does this by consulting with 44 member congregations who are seeking to be intentionally multicultural through the denomination’s “Juust Change” ministry, and through the Building the Beloved Community program, which, she says, “sponsors annual social change conferences focused on the intersection of race and class.” Janice works in a similar context for the UUA, serving as the Multicultural Growth Director, “moving across and between cultures in terms of communication, growth, and

development,” to build the UUA’s educational resources for social responsibility and conflict transformation education.

While many of the people in this study are able to engage their work on a full-time basis, some are bi-vocational, for the border-crossing work that they do is not funded on a full-time basis. This is the case for Anne, who describes her primary work as pastor of a “base community church” in the Denver area. This is a new ministry of the United Church of Christ, one in which Anne has worked with a local community to start an intentionally multicultural congregation with a “liberationist community model for meeting together,” including communal engagement around Biblical texts, praxis-oriented application to apply religious wisdom to generative themes, and social action and activism in the surrounding community. Nancy’s work is bi-vocational, as well. In addition to her job as Christian Education Minister of her local congregation, Nancy works as the Women’s Program Director and Volunteer Intern Coordinator for *El Centro Humanitario para los Trabajadores* (Humanitarian Center for Workers) in Denver. Nancy’s job is to educate two communities who interface with the Center, “serving as a bridge between low-income immigrants from Latin America and the non-immigrant community who are mostly middle class or wealthy Anglo people.”

Seth’s professional work breaks from the pattern of parish or non-profit ministry that describes the work of the majority of the research participants. Seth works for Flobots, a political rock and hip hop group. Using Flobots’ music as a means to connect communities and music fans to social justice work, Seth develops and coordinates music and curriculum that connects the band and their fans to social justice-based training and facilitation opportunities and to social justice work in their communities.

Awareness of Privilege

In describing how privilege operates in their lives, many of the respondents name the ways that their everyday lives are marked by race, gender, and economic privilege. Courtney describes his economic privilege as “not having to worry about money, because I have a secure job and don’t live week to week,” connecting his economic stability to the fact that he and his wife are both well-educated, with professional careers. When combined with whiteness, Courtney experiences few barriers:

Obviously there’s the whole being a white male; just seeing the advantages of that over time. I don’t have any barriers. Here’s a good example: Mt. 25 has an advisory board, and basically it’s the movers and the shakers in the community. If we need something, we call on them, and they open doors for us. And, pretty much all of them are white male, because that’s historically who has power. It’s easy for me to communicate with that crowd, to know how to speak, how to dress. It’s not something I’ve ever had to worry about a whole lot. Education is also a huge thing that gives me advantages that other people don’t have. Just that I can make myself sound and look a certain way if I’m trying to get something.

Courtney’s whiteness, his education, and his social class have provided him the kind of capital that Bourdieu suggests is acquired by belonging to particular social groups.

Anne also talks about the ways that the pieces of her identity as white, middle-class, and a clergyperson combine to create certain personal and professional privileges for her. At the same time, we see that she operates with an awareness of the capital she holds in such a way that it can be utilized for allyship:

I know that being a white, highly educated, Christian clergyperson privileges me to have access to places where people in my own congregation don’t have access. And, I try to use that access in a way that is consistent with being an ally and consistent with trying to be in solidarity to turn that privilege on its head. So, I can walk into a congress person’s office without much risk, which I do. I get invited to participate in delegations to Washington. I get invited to come pray at stuff. And, the people at the base, that wouldn’t happen for them. They would

never receive those invitations; someone's not poking on the organizer to say "we really need voices from the base."

Seth also talks about the ways her white, middle-class status in border-crossing settings provides capital in terms of voice for her:

Oftentimes at some point during the week where I'll be doing work with queer youth of color around immigration stuff, and there's this place where we'll know when we walk into a place that I'm the person usually in the group that's referenced to speak for the group. Or, I'm expected to be the most articulate person there, even though that's not the case.

Seth and a number of other respondents also describe the privileges they experience related to driving and police leniency. She reflects on decisions regarding who will drive in the context of her educational work with youth of color: "It's just a reality that we'll make a decision for someone who's less risky to drive. Just that reality about having to find somebody to drive everyone there. And, I'm a person who is called to do that. We don't even think about me being in that role as a white person with citizenship." Laura also describes her ability to drive without fear of being ticketed or arrested:

I hadn't gotten a speeding ticket until this winter. It's a privilege in many ways. But, you know, I'm a young, white woman who kind of looks professional and harmless to most other people, including the police. So, my guess is that I slipped through. At one point I realized that my habit of running yellow lights was a privilege thing; that I can run yellow lights because I'm probably not going to get stopped. If there's a Black man or a Hispanic woman who looks like she doesn't have car insurance running a light behind or in front of me, they're going to get stopped.

The people in this study are aware that they experience privileges explicitly because they belong to particular social groups. But, this awareness doesn't emerge on its own, for as we know, the habitus of privilege continues to operate because privilege

itself operates as an unseen norm. How, then, can we begin to understand the origins of how these people became sensitized to the operation of privilege in their daily lives?

Conversion from Privilege to Border-crossing

The stories of the people reflected in this study reorient Rambo and Farhadian's stages of conversion in significant ways. Rambo and Farhadian's heuristic of conversion follows a pattern of crisis, quest, encounter, interaction, commitment and consequences. While the stories in my study reflect certain pieces of this pattern, it is re-oriented in significant ways, particularly to reflect the sorts of mentors, allies, and communities of accountability that become important in maintaining an ongoing commitment to resisting the discomforts of identity transformation that are present when seeking to change identities of privilege. In addition, where Rambo and Farhadian's heuristic involves the stage of encounter following the crisis that provokes a desire for change, my re-orientation starts with an encounter across lines of difference that provokes the crisis. There is also a stage beyond that of making a commitment to a new way of being, which requires the act of changing behavior toward greater power-sharing. Therefore, my revised heuristic is thus: encounter/crisis, quest, discomfort/retrenchment, reinforcement, commitment, acting differently. First, I briefly describe some significant experiences in the lives of these people that seem to poise them particularly well for the later work of identity transformation which would take place in their lives.

Origins

There seem to be particular experiences in these people's life journeys that have poised them to do the work of border-crossing. For each of these people, becoming a border-crosser includes the ability to identify the operation of privilege in their own lives

and relationships. This begins early-on, through experiences where difference is made apparent and privilege is illuminated to them.

Josie and Tracey both locate their upbringing in the desegregating South as the source of this illumination. In these places, signs attached to swimming pools and bathrooms signified the boundaries of belonging. Tracey describes these as both literal signs which indicated access to services and resources, as well as cultural signs which indicated “the best of things:”

As I look back on it now, the South was littered with signs that indicated the various ways that privilege played out socially. I didn’t know this at five, or eight, or probably even fifteen—I didn’t quite understand it with those words—but when I was a kid there were still signs on the water fountains that said which ones were for whites and which ones were for, I guess it usually said “colored” at that point. And, you know, over time, it did become clearer and clearer to me, particularly as I was coming closer to graduating from high school, that those signs were indicators of “the best things,” you know, the best places in public accommodation or entire accommodation. The water fountains, the swimming pools, the high school was in better shape. So these days I just talk about having had signs, I mean literally having *signs* that were indicators that I could have access.

In Tracey’s early years, the signs demarcating difference were not even apparent to her, but over time they came to indicate the “best of things.” She doesn’t say what particular experiences contributed to this illumination, though we might speculate that this illumination had to do with the widespread, public desegregation taking place at the time. We see over time that Tracey came to realize that these signs existed as lines of demarcation between those with certain privileges and those prohibited access. Through this, Tracey can easily see that access to the best of things equals privilege, and that she is the recipient of many of these privileges.

A number of respondents also describe experiences where the operation of privilege in their lives was made explicit through changes in their social realities that reveal lack of privilege. Courtney, Laura, and Seth each describe an early shift in the social reality of their lives as illuminating privilege, where previously it had been unnoticeable.

Courtney, who is a white, middle-class pastor's son, describes a time when his father went on leave from full time ministry due to mental illness. Courtney's family moved from suburban Des Moines to the city's center:

I saw how different the way I grew up before was, how my friends there lived. There was a clear difference between the way my family thought about things. It was just assumed that I was going to go to college, and do well in school, and have some sort of professional career, whereas that was definitely not an assumption of the kids I ran around with from my neighborhood. I was really the only one that made it out of there. It wasn't even an option to stay there.

Also the child of a pastor, Laura describes a similar shift as her family moved from urban Denver to rural Montana. In Denver, Laura's father had been a graduate student, which steeped the family in an elite educational environment immersed in intellectual and ethnic diversity. In the move to Montana, Laura experienced a sort of outsider status as a preacher's kid, but also found her social class privilege illuminated:

I moved to rural Montana where my dad did his ministry, where almost everybody was white. So in some ways it was a reverse culture shock. Because we were the pastor's family who was oftentimes new in town, I always had this outsider status. So other kids made assumptions about me as the minister's kid and as the new kid in school that I just had to face a lot and to negotiate. And at the same time, my dad had a master's degree, and my parents were better educated than a lot of the parishioners and a lot of the people in the towns where we lived.

Like Courtney's experience of undergoing shifts in social class due to the movement of his pastor father, Laura was exposed for the first time to differing social realities due to changes in her father's professional context:

These were Montana farm towns at the end of the farm crisis. So, a lot of people were struggling; tons of grain drain, lots of people leaving the town, and leaving the state, leaving the town for bigger cities in the state. My dad took me with him sometimes to talk to people. There was this old vet who was living in a shack that stunk to high heaven. Really awful. My dad would check in with this guy as part of his ministerial duties. And he took me with him because I think my parents really intentionally exposed me to some of that, and just really fostered in me that people who are living like that deserve respect and care. In fact, we need to care for them more than the other more fortunate people in our community. I think that was huge in building my awareness and that we had a pretty . . . that we had a good life.

Seth also experienced a sense of dislocation, which illuminated difference and privilege for her. Growing up as the child of parents in the military, Seth learned early how to cross borders of belonging:

I grew up in a military family, and spent many years of my childhood living in Berlin, Germany. There was this dynamic that I was aware of from very young that all of my friends and siblings were these super blonde-haired, blue-eyed kids. And I knew, even at a really young age, that we were really well-liked in Germany. Folks would make comments to my mom on the street about her beautiful blonde haired children. I remember from really young having this awareness that because of something I had no control over, some way that I looked that I didn't understand the political dynamics of, we were favored in some way. To me, even though I didn't have the words to analyze it, that was my first experience of privilege.

Seth also describes a growing awareness of the privilege she felt as a United States citizen living in other countries, and then the dislocation she felt once she moved back to the States:

We were always aware that we were protected in a different way because we were U.S. citizens when we traveling internationally. And then it shifted a little bit, because in the military everyone is on this similar socio-economic plane. The

kind of housing you get is based upon your father's rank, not on what families are earning. When we got back to the U.S. I realized we were relatively a lower middle class family. I'd never experienced a lot of intense class stuff. Within the U.S. all these things were turned on their head for me. Also understanding in other contexts, I was on the other side of that line.

Each of these people can clearly name the ways in which they experienced privilege in their early lives, and how this sense of privilege was illuminated for them. At the same time, there were moments of disruption in the lives of Courtney, Laura, and Seth, disruptions that further illuminated the ways they had experienced privilege while at the same time helping to internalize a sense of difference—they were aware of the operation of privilege in their lives (whether or not they would name it that at the time), *and* they could identify with marginalization. This ability to identify with and experience both privilege and marginalization hearkens to the both/*and* identity construction that is reflected in the stories of Anzaldúa, Lee, Elizondo. It is my sense that these moments of disruption were the starting point (explicitly or implicitly) to their transformations of identity, and also to the border-crossing work that would become part of their professional journeys.

Provoking Dissonance through Encounter and Crisis

As we know, privileged people don't simply dispense of the identity of privilege or practices of entitlement and domination because privilege has been illuminated for them. As important as the early experience of privilege and border-crossing above appear, we know that socialization toward privileged identities is relentless, normative, and that privilege continues to live on in our identities practices. It is moments that provoke dissonance and discomfort later in the lives of these people that begin to provide a foothold for critically assessing the operation and disruption of privilege. It is this

dissonance that provokes the critical consideration of one's social location and identity such that the motivation for change occurs. Tatum supports this stage of conversion by describing the coming to consciousness of the privileges associated with whiteness, in particular, as involving dissonance inducing encounters. She says that white racial identity becomes apparent for the first time in moments of dissonance, when one's core sense of self is challenged in an encounter across lines of difference that makes race visible.²²⁸ Conde-Frazier names the encounter that is part of conversion toward becoming a multicultural people a "borderland space of risk."²²⁹ "It is hearing multiple voices, at times with conflicting messages."²³⁰

Facing conflicting messages about the self, about one's neighbor, and about the nature of the world is disorienting. In education, it is also that piece of the learning process that signals to us that we are learning; that a change of mind is occurring. Dissonance, while uncomfortable, is constructive. This experience with discomfort is vitally necessary in the process of transformation for people with privilege, for it is our compulsion with our own comfort that often keeps us from change. For Talvacchia, this sense of dissonance signals that one is "seeing clearly. . . [doing the] self-reflection and other-reflection that helps us to listen and understand others better."²³¹ An encounter across lines of difference that provokes a crisis of identity and helps the person of privilege to see more clearly the ways in which privilege dehumanizes and oppresses others is an essential piece of the conversion process for privileged people.

²²⁸ Beverly Daniel Tatum, *"Why Are All the Black Kids Sitting Together in the Cafeteria?" And Other Conversations About Race* (New York: Basic Books, 1997), 96-97.

²²⁹ Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, "From Hospitality to Shalom," in Conde-Frazier, Kang, and Parrett, *A Many Colored Kingdom: Multicultural Dynamics for Spiritual Formation*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 176-177.

²³⁰ Conde-Frazier, "From Hospitality to Shalom," 176-177.

²³¹ Kathleen Talvacchia, *Critical Minds and Discerning Hearts: A Spirituality of Multicultural Teaching* (St. Louis: Chalice Press, 2003), 66.

Frank, who directs urban immersion experiences for college students in Los Angeles, names the opportunity for travel in his adolescent and young adult years as the place that began to provoke questioning about his assumptions about privilege. He describes a church-sponsored trip to Ukraine—a mission to minister to orphans and poor children—as a turning point that prompted a certain disillusionment in relation to his centers of truth. This encounter provoked Frank to re-consider the purpose behind an evangelical model of mission work and sparked a spiritual disillusionment:

I think when I went to Ukraine and worked with orphans, at the end of the trip I was really disillusioned with our purpose and our goal. Saving people, telling people that they're not going to go to heaven. A very evangelical way of looking at things. In the very end of my four weeks there I was like, "These kids don't need a prayer, they need a better situation, like they need a government that's gonna have better laws for orphans and people that want to adopt..."

He further reflected upon the presumptions he brought to that context about the relative rightness of American culture, particularly in relation to those aspects of what are often considered American entitlements to media and leisure:

I started thinking, "If I had all the power in the world I would take all these orphans back to the U.S." But then I started thinking about it and I'm like, "They don't need baseball games and fireworks. These kids are so innocent and so full of life and imagination, why would I want to bring them to the U.S. only to watch TV, watch music videos, get lazy, play video games and like, overeat, you know?" That's when I finally separated myself. The United States is not the answer, because I found a better answer in helping them to find their own quality of life. It's just giving them more opportunities to find their full potential. I think those types of trips helped me at least separate myself from my home culture and my identity, and not carry my perspective, my lens into how other people should live.

As challenging as these circumstances were for Frank, we see a critical consideration of the privileges associated with U.S. citizenship and with a sense of Christian superiority. Though this encounter provoked a certain disillusionment with his centers of trust and value—namely a sort of religious superiority that seems tied up with privilege, as well as

a global superiority committed to American entitlement—this encounter across lines of difference allows Frank to begin to see the habitus which heretofore had operated implicitly in his consciousness.

Tracey describes a moment of encounter and crisis when she participated in a march in Washington, D.C. during the first Gulf War. Like Frank, this encounter involved physical as well as emotional dislocation, and prompted Tracey to re-consider her identity of whiteness as something within which to place trust. Having gone to the march alone, Tracey describes her experience walking next to a group of Nation of Islam protestors:

There was a group of individuals surrounded by a human chain of young men of color who formed a kind of human wall with all of the rest of the marchers inside that wall of young men. And as I walked alongside, it suddenly occurred to me that they didn't need me, didn't particularly have any use for me. They were particularly content to have me march alongside, but I was not going to be invited to join.

This encounter for Tracey involved the sudden revelation that she as a white person was not necessarily needed. Her particular sort of privilege offered no currency there. This prompted dissonance and reflection related to her social location:

Walking along the Nation of Islam folks, there was a pretty profound moment of feeling unnecessary. For all of the things that I would now describe as being white: thinking that I've got all the answers, believing that I'm important in any context, that I have a place and a role and something to contribute. That sense of feeling unnecessary, unimportant, invisible, was something that I had sometimes experienced as a woman, but had not really made that connection with white identity. That stuck with me at that moment as an awakening. Or, you asked about conversion. I suppose that was one. Just having a real sense of being unnecessary.

Tracey's dissonance-inducing encounter includes a very significant physical dislocation, finding one's self in the midst of an entire group, or even nation, of people who are "not

you.” In this encounter, Tracey realized that she was not particularly needed; challenging the sense of self-importance that often accompanies privilege.

This encounter also prompted a sort of fluidity of identity in which Tracey was able to relate the sense of being unnecessary that she experienced at the march to the feeling of invisibility that she experienced as a woman in a dominant culture of men. “Conversion,” she says, “is really about having lived in a world that you understood to be one way, and then having some extraordinary opening take place that leads you to the other side in a world that you see and experience very differently. Something is shifting, and the world no longer looks the same.”

Quest: A Search for New Options

Because privileged people are so good at fleeing circumstances of discomfort, there is often the impulse to escape the dissonance associated with crisis. Tatum says that the search for new possibilities for being in the world, what Rambo describes as “quest,” has the potential to push past the privileged compulsion to flee discomfort.²³² Thus, we see in Sallie McFague’s article, “Conversion: Life on the Edge of the Raft,” her own search for examples of “great conversion” that “bring not comfort . . . but demand a courage, a willingness to risk and suffer, to live lives of dis-ease and spiritual adventure that is unsettling if not terrifying to contemplate.”²³³ For McFague, such examples include Paul, Augustine, John Woolman, and Dorothy Day.

Laura shares her quest to internalize her own experience of encounter and crisis after several months of study in Mexico. During her time in Mexico, she developed a

²³² Tatum, 109.

²³³ Sallie McFague, “Conversion: Life on the Edge of the Raft,” *Interpretation* 32, no. 3 (July 1978), 255.

deep relationship with the female head of her host family, who talked with her about Mexican politics, about Mexican women living in co-ops, and who exposed her to *Jesu Christo el Revolucionario*. After this encounter, Laura returned to college in the Pacific Northeast, where her quest involved experimentation with her own political voice. She started writing revolutionary papers in her Spanish class, saying that writing in Spanish gave her the safety to say things she might not utter in English. “Having Spanish as my second language,” she says, “I couldn’t nuance my writing like I could in English, so I just wrote these papers that were so straightforward. I had an amazing Spanish teacher who just egged me on.” Here we see Laura in a period of questing where she is trying on a new voice—a revolutionary, angry, intolerant voice—with the support of a mentor and ally.

Tracey talks as well about finding a bridge to explore the dynamics of privilege and oppression. This is what Talvacchia describes as the ability to build empathy for and solidarity with the experiences of oppression of another by identifying one’s own sources of the pain of marginalization. For Tracey—who was immersed in the dynamics of multicultural community in an early pastoral appointment—tapping into her experiences and knowledge of the dynamics of sexism helped her to explore, as she says, the “wider dynamics of oppression” and how they affected not only the victims of oppression, but the victimizers as well. She states:

I guess if I had to describe how I got from one place to another, sexism became a kind of bridge. I got how that affected the lives of women. And over time it helped me bridge, to understand how it is racism affects not only people of color but in the same way that you could understand how sexism affects men ultimately, that was kind of my bridge into this wider understanding of oppression.

Tracey's desire to understand and effectively pastor to folk in her congregation whose experiences of the world were markedly different than hers in terms of experiences of privilege and oppression, requires a quest to develop understanding, empathy, and solidarity. Her own experiences—though not identical—provided a bridge for doing that. So, resources for one's quest for new ways of being come both from within—from one's own experiences and identifications—and from without—from archetypal figures, mentors, and supporters who invite us to try out our ideas and voice.

Reinforcement: Spaces of Challenge, Accountability, and Forgiveness

Conde-Frazier says that embedding conversion in a community that “demand[s] constant reinforcement,” is essential.²³⁴ This constant reinforcement in community means providing a space of challenge, accountability, and forgiveness to the person in transformation. Courtney names the importance of relationship in the as a source of reinforcement:

The problem I have with conversion in any context is that you can't go back to the way you were. I think that in just about every single context, until you have some process or some community that keeps reinforcing that [change], it's just too easy to slide back into the way you've been before. Unless there is some way of reinforcing, then it's pretty easy for the conversion experience to have minimal impact.

Anne's finds accountability and challenge in the multicultural congregation she serves. I don't preach,” she says, “but we talk about the text together and bring everybody's wisdom to bear on both the text and to what's happening to use it in our lives, particularly in relation to issues of immigration and economic justice.” With this hierarchically flattened and broadened model of knowledge generation and religious

²³⁴ Elizabeth Conde-Frazier, “Prejudice and Conversion,” in Conde-Frazier, Kang, and Parrett, *A Many Colored Kingdom: Multicultural Dynamics for Spiritual Formation* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2004), 119.

leadership, Anne is immersed in a community that will continue to reinforce her commitment to dismantling privilege and facilitate her conversion. She says, "It requires a certain kind of attitude and certain sense of skills to be able to go over to the other side as it were and to keep your mouth shut and learn and try not to judge, to be open and curious."

Commitment: Confession and Forgiveness in Community

Grounding in community should provoke a movement to commit to a new way of being. This commitment involves the movements of confession and forgiveness in communities of accountability and support. As privilege often operates as an undetectable habitus and is also very much a dehumanizing sin that we are tempted time and again to repeat because of the lure of social reward, this commitment toward transformation for people of privilege must include the ongoing, public act confession of the ways we continue to dominate. It must also include acts of compassion and forgiveness for our transgressions so that we are not paralyzed with guilt and anger, but are able to move forward toward new encounters with conversion.

Talvacchia describes this forgiveness as one that combines God's grace and human will.²³⁵ This means that when confessions arise of abuses of power or recapitulations into comfort, both the individual convert and the community of allies offer a grace-extending forgiveness. This is a compassion that Conde-Frazier says "brings us from indifference to care," helping us to learn empathy.²³⁶ This, she says, is

²³⁵ Talvacchia, 70.

²³⁶ Conde-Frazier, "From Hospitality to Shalom," 194.

the ultimate border-crossing, “moving from blood-ties to culture-ties,” cultivating our common humanity as people in a broken world.²³⁷

Seth talks about her conversion as a border-crosser as both internal and external, and the role of confession in uniting the two. She names the spaces offered by the church to confess our sins of dehumanization as one of the only spaces in the world where we can do this:

[Confession] is this concept where we actually get to be present with our whole selves and walk into the world as de-compartmentalized people. Everywhere we walk in the world we’re always playing our identities to get our needs met or to be loved or just to survive – whether they’re privileged or marginalized identities. We know really intuitively how to bring certain pieces of our identities forward to get what we need in that moment. I feel like I’m doing internal border-crossing work where I’m trying to think about myself as a decompartmentalized person; what it means for me to allow those different pieces of who I am to inform each other without my entire identity being wrapped up in one of them. And what does it mean when there are [external] spaces where we’re allowed to show up as people with all of those identities? We have to build capacity in our community to listen to each other’s experiences around oppression and to have a confessional space around privilege.

For Seth, confession in a community of forgiveness and accountability allows us to resist the temptation to live as either/or people in the world in order to secure our comfort and to get our needs met. Through the vehicle of confession, Seth is able imagine what it might be like to “show up” as a whole person, as a both/and person who expresses and reflects all dimensions of her identity.

Acting Differently: Conversion as a Constant Choice

The result of conversion is not simply a shift in self-understanding. This shift must include a joining in solidarity with others toward the liberation of the oppressed. Talvacchia calls this “acting differently ... aligning one’s self with the targeted group,”

²³⁷ Conde-Frazier, “From Hospitality to Shalom,” 195.

which involves a willingness to notice and stay in moments of personal discomfort and to cultivate skills for critical thinking and discernment.²³⁸ This is what Talvacchia calls “conversion to the other.”²³⁹ Conde-Frazier says that conversion calls us to “radical action” with liberationists, “to participate in the struggle for liberation of those who are oppressed by or of those who suffer and die for want of human dignity. Conversion is both an announcement as well as a transforming action whose focus is the fulfillment of the kingdom.”²⁴⁰

Anne talks about what it means to act differently as that of being “born again:”

People talk about “Were you ever born again,” in that more evangelical Christian way of thinking about this. I’m like, “There was that moment when I was on the [U.S. and Mexico] border when I was converted to doing the justice work of the kingdom.” And, actually, I think that’s the kind of conversion that God wants from us. Not a conversion to a certain set of doctrines or beliefs or whatever, but conversion to a way of being in the world. And in the realm of faith, the Christian faith, conversion to God’s way in the world, which is protecting the vulnerable and choosing love, and choosing life, and choosing to embrace difference instead of being afraid of it. Resisting what empire tries to impose upon us. And I think it’s not a one-shot deal at all. It’s this constant choosing over and over again, every day, if I’m going to be faithful to God and God’s way or faithful to the empire. Everyday we’re presented with these choices. And sometimes we do alright, and sometimes we don’t because we’re human. It is a choice about a way of living. The new heaven and the new earth have everything to do with how we do our part to live into that vision.

Tracey echoes this sentiment, noting that in her experience, conversion is not a rapturous, one-time event, but rather seeking conversion and transforming time and again. “It wasn’t always the life-changing, incredibly profound huge, all at once moments. That isn’t how it worked. It was just over and over again having an experience where the world as I knew it before that was to never be the same after that.”

²³⁸ Talvacchia, 75.

²³⁹ Talvacchia, 67.

²⁴⁰ Conde-Frazier, “Prejudice and Conversion,” 116.

In addition to being in communities of accountability and taking public, liberating action, conversion involves an active spiritual practice. Anne describes it not as “sitting down every day to read the Bible,” but “a constant conversation with God about what I’m seeing, what I’m experiencing, what I’m supposed to be learning in this situation, where is God present in this situation, as a sort of running conversation.” This is an active spiritual practice; conversion as an active conversation with God, and active consideration of one’s identity and movement in the world, and a commitment to considering one’s privilege and to transformation on an ongoing basis in communities of accountability and forgiveness.

Reflections on Identities as Border-crossers

The border-crossers presented in Chapter Two were immersed and socialized early-on in literal border-crossing settings, where multiple cultures and ways of being were present and interacting. Instead of being immersed from a young age in such an environment, the people we have just met name moments of *discomfort -inducing encounter across lines of difference* that illuminated their privilege. These encounters provided a sort of re-socialization that allowed them to look back with critical eyes to the ways they were shaped as people with privilege, to look within to identify the ways they continue to internalize and externalize practices of entitlement and domination, and to look forward to the re-crafting of identity that transcends their core socialization.

While Anzaldúa, Lee, and Elizondo were immersed in these settings out of necessity, the respondents in this study have to continually seek out such encounters in order to persist in the pursuit of identity reconstruction. For Tracey, the crafting of a

border-crossing identity is both *an act of identity construction and a process of capacity building*:

Border-crossing requires, in my case, an ongoing and developing awareness of white identity and white privilege. Being willing to try to develop the capacity to know when I should stop and ask, ‘What just happened here or what have I just done?’ It’s both a personal awareness of identity and the capacity to be in other cultural environments and to do that with a kind of respect or understanding and accountability.

Perhaps, for people with privilege, identity construction and capacity building are one in the same.

Much like our border-crossing authors, my research participants name border-crossing identity as both *an orientation to the world and a literal practice of crossing lines of social belonging*. “It’s not as just this literal, I take my passport and I fly out of the county and cross the border—an actual imposed physical border—but also this whole kind of orientation towards life where it’s not enough to operate in my own fear, in my own comfort zone,” says Anne.

To add nuance to the description of border-crossing identity as defined by the previous authors, Frank describes this mode of identity construction as *both deliberate and accidental*:

It’s like this accidental experience and it’s also this deliberate, intentional movement into learning about another experience; another worldview, paradigm, etc. With border crossers, it’s that you know you’re crossing this invisible line into another community. It doesn’t even have to be between countries, but it can be between freeways, between doorsteps, or just . . . I think people probably can pinpoint when that crossing happens for the most part. But there are times when it’s accidental when it catches you blind-sided.

Whether deliberate or accidental the practice of crossing lines of social belonging necessarily requires a shift of orientation in which *managing tension and discomfort becomes a regular activity*. This was true for our border-crossing authors, and it is also

true for the people in this study. One enters any community bringing both their identifications with privilege and marginalization, and negotiates the tensions that are present related to acceptance and belonging. Frank reflects the relational toll that is present as he talks about border-crossing as a second generation Latin American who possesses significant educational and socio-economic privilege:

There are times, still, in Los Angeles when I'm crossing borders and there's this insecurity of, "Will this community accept me? Will the Latino immigrant community accept me even though I'm doing some organizing around this cause? Will poor people accept me?" These are the people I wanna be with and kick it with. Will they accept me or will I feel this type of arrogance on myself like, "I'm doing you a favor, I'm doing you a service. We're on the same team, buddy." It's a real tension.

Courtney also describes the discomfort of straddling lines of social belonging, particularly in relation to interacting with people in positions of power—an inherent and necessary piece of the work of bringing community support to Mt. 25's ministries. While in his younger years, living in this tension took a significant relational toll on him, bridging this tension now appears as a gift:

For a long time, when I was an adolescent, I had trouble with why I could never fit into one group, because I never did feel totally a part of one group. And I still feel pressure sometimes from folks that I work with. They'll start bad-mouthing city decision makers, city council people, or administrators of non-profits, or school people—people in power. And, I get that critique, that problem. Someone else has power over them. But at the same time I'm in that world of other administrators I guess, so I think that my life experience has given me insight into multiple worldviews that makes it difficult sometimes to be in that tension, but also really it's a gift.

Courtney and Frank are pointing to the *tolerance for ambiguity* that emerged in the stories of Anzaldúa, Lee, and Elizondo, and appears as a hallmark of border-crossing identity.

For my respondents, identifying as both/and people does not mean shedding one's self of the identity of privilege, but rather *being aware of how socialization toward privilege happens*, balancing that identification with privilege with *empathic identification with marginalization*, and an intentional effort to *utilize the capital one holds* as a person with privilege toward power-sharing practice. Frank, who teaches college students about privilege as they encounter poverty and difference in downtown Los Angeles, rejects a denial of privilege:

I have to tell them: "Understand that you probably won't be fully accepted into the communities that you want to like you. You gotta just work your ass off to make sure that people don't have to struggle. Show that you understand and that you're willing to put the time and effort and your resources into it regardless of whether if you're one of the crew. Suck it up and do it. Sometimes, my students are like, "Well...I'm not white anymore. I'm gonna dye my hair black. I'm gonna get dreads. I'm gonna get contacts. I'm gonna speak Spanish. I'm gonna wear Legalize LA t-shirts. I'm gonna listen to hip hop." I'm like, "It doesn't matter what you wear. You're always going to be white. Own it. Just be yourself. Learn all these things [about privilege and oppression], but claim your set. You know. Claim your neighborhood."

Frank wants his students to avoid denying their whiteness, and ultimately, their privilege.

Being aware of and claiming privilege as a piece of one's identity includes the ability to identify the social capital one holds, and to use that capital in ways that promotes power-sharing. Just as people with border-crossing identities do not divest of the reality of privilege as a piece of their identities, they are also unwilling to deny the ways they continue to hold capital. For border-crossers with significant privilege, power-sharing is not about doing nothing. We saw this earlier in this chapter, when Anne and Seth become aware that they are using their professional voices as advocates for social justice. Peter, who directs a multi-faith social action ministry in Los Angeles, points to a sense of allyship as well:

It's a vain hope for people of privilege to renounce their privilege. One sees it done, but one never sees it done well. It's a little naïve. "I've returned my privilege card, and I'm now living like 'other' people." But, a useful service to the community is to use the tools that you do have as a person of privilege to be a powerful advocate. It's a complex process of exercising some degree of privilege, but at least being self-aware of it.

Frank also points to the notion that power-sharing for border-crossers involves an intricate dance of knowing when the wisdom of communities that are not one's own must emerge, and when to offer one's voice and particular capital. At times, he says, one must *be open to and willing to learn from the wisdom of those around him:*

When it comes to power sharing its being very deliberate about looking at what resources you have and where you can share that with others. And, it doesn't necessarily have to be with resources and material goods, but also in sitting around the table in a meeting and sharing power by not speaking as much. It's learning from other folks, "How do you best organize your community? How do you best represent the needs of your community?" Stepping back and listening.

At the same time, a good border-crosser needs to know when the capital that he or she holds can be useful. Frank continues:

I think when it comes to power sharing it can't always be this kind of passive thing. Like, "I'm white, I'm male, so I should take a step back." Or, "I'm brown, I'm male, but I also have a college education and I have money." I shouldn't take that as like, "I know nothing." I think it's not always licensed when you power share to be like, "My power is not credible, so therefore even though I know that I have these skills I'm gonna take a huge step back, not say a word, be the humble servant from across the way." Instead, we should have a spirit of, "Let me hear your ideas. Lay it all out. What research do you have? Let me throw in some of my resources. Let's challenge each other."

Conclusion: A Vision for Conversion and Border-crossing

The participants of this study reflect an understanding of conversion as involving specific, sustained encounters in communities where difference—not dominance—is the norm. If such a setting discomfort and dissonance are not signs that something is wrong,

rather they signal that something is very right—that the deep process of change is taking place. In this ongoing process of change, the quest for new ways of being involves the guiding vision of people who reflect archetypes of transformation, along with mentors and allies who can both ground and affirm the process of conversion while at the same time provide a space for accountability and forgiveness. Ultimately, evidence of conversion from identities of privilege toward identities of border-crossing is reflected in acting differently. Acting differently includes: identification and confession one's own preoccupations with and practices of entitlement and domination; resistance of the social rewards associated with compliance with systems of privilege and oppression; an active, ongoing spiritual discernment of God's call; and radical action to share power with and seek the liberation of those who experience domination and oppression.

This ongoing act of conversion inspires the construction of border-crossing identities that emerges as both an orientation and a practice. In the deliberate attempt to literally cross into worlds that are not one's one, sometimes finding one's self by accident on borders where new sources of dissonance, new crises, and new opportunities for conversion and transformation of identity emerge. Border-crossing includes building an awareness of what we don't know—the spaces and places that can enhance our empathic understanding—and also being able to share our power and capital in ways that are constructive. But most of all, the cultivation of a border-crossing identity operates for these people as a vocational identity—a calling to have a foot in more than one world. “For whatever reason” says Anne, “my vocation is meant to include crossing over into places where other people might not go. Not as a tourist, but as a humble person who needs to learn something.”

Chapter 5

Concluding Thoughts: Clues toward Practices of Conversion from Privilege to Border-crossing

The models of border-crossing identity presented in the works of Anzaldúa, Lee, and Elizondo, combined with the vision of conversion and identity formation offered by the stories told in the qualitative study, help us to construct a composite picture of border-crossing identity that our educational practices can work toward. In that light, our hope in constructing pedagogies for identity transformation is to develop people who:

1. are able to identify the operation of privilege in their lives and selves;
2. are able to express an empathic understanding of marginalization;
3. are able to utilize the capital associated with that privilege toward the empowerment of the marginalized;
4. are able to speak, relate, and translate in more than one language or set of cultural codes;
5. are able to creatively navigate and relate within the contradiction and tension associated with living at the interstices of culture and meaning; and
6. seek to construct an identity that exists beyond the confines of the dual categories of privilege/oppressed.

Practices help to socialize us toward the formation of our identities and orientation to the world, and likewise our sense of orientation helps to sustain these practices. In this light, the sorts of educational practices that we need are those that assist in the development of an overall *orientation* toward border-crossing identity, and also those that help to educate people toward the *practices* of border-crossing. In addition, our educational practices need to *address the barriers* associated with sustained change.

While a full pedagogical model is beyond the scope of this project, what I offer here are some practices—drawn from the study of border-crossing identity and conversion in this project—that might be utilized in an adult congregational, religious community, or small group setting toward the development of border-crossing identity for people with privilege.

Sustained Encounters across Lines of Difference

This is the most important feature of any pedagogy of transformation that works to build solidarity across lines of difference. These are physical, relational, dissonance-inducing spaces where persons can encounter multiple cultures, epistemologies, and ways of being. While the border-crossers we studied were immersed in these environments, and my research participants mostly “came upon” these environments, these settings have to be constructed and continually sought out for people with privilege seeking educational environments for transforming identities of privilege. In these settings, skills are built for encountering and tolerating difference and ambiguity. The building of relational ties also assists in the development of an empathic understanding of marginalization. Participants in these spaces also have opportunities to build skills for understanding and relating within multiple languages and cultural codes. While engaging in sustained relationships across the lines of difference will necessarily bring about dissonance related to interpersonal conflict, developing sustained relationships can ultimately assist in working through this dissonance.

Engaging Alternative Histories

An important piece of being re-socialized away from an identity of privilege is to understand the myths presented in dominant views of history and historic events, and to explore and internalize alternative histories to those that were presented as a part of one's dominant socialization. Elizondo embodied this sort of exploration in his study of the farmworker's movement. This piece inspires critical thinking, but also inspires dissonance, as persons are exposed to understandings of the history—and ultimately, of their sense of truth about the way the world works—that are markedly different from the views of the world they have held to be true.

Understanding Privilege and Socialization

The goal here is to understand how privilege and oppression function as a dehumanizing dialectic and as socialized habitus. This piece builds critical thinking. While being exposed to alternative histories and being exposed to theories of privilege and oppression can cause great dissonance, understanding how we are socialized into a habitus of privilege and how we internalize this habitus can give us tools to work through this dissonance. This piece should include building an awareness of the concept of capital, how we hold and trade capital to maintain our privileged status, and how we might leverage our capital toward the empowerment of the marginalized.

Looking with Critical Eyes at Ourselves

This piece includes looking back with critical eyes to the ways we have been shaped as people with privilege, looking within to identify the ways we continue to internalize and externalize practices of entitlement and domination, and looking forward to the re-crafting of identity that transcends their core socialization. Awareness should be

present on the part of educators (and the community of learners) that this piece can cause great dissonance in the understanding of one's self, and can also cause great relational dissonance as one considers the ways their identity has been shaped and sustained by family members, mentors, and other loved ones.

*Exposure to Archetypes of Border-crossers
Who Have Dismantled Identities of Privilege*

Models of people who have lived out a sustained commitment to disrupting privilege, crossing borders of class and culture, and being about the work of power-sharing and empowerment of the marginalized—Dorothy Day, *Jesu Christo el Revolucionario*, and others—provide inspiration and vision for the re-crafting of identities of privilege. Activities can include exploring these people's biographies, their work in the world, and the facets of their religious lives. The inspiration behind exploring these archetypes can provide significant vision for persisting with identity transformation amidst multiple barriers and discomforts.

*Spaces to Imaginatively Consider
Alternate Social Realities and Self-Understandings*

Our three border-crossing authors each talked about the important role that creativity, dreaming, and imaginative expression played in the development of their border-crossing identities. Many of the participants in my study also talked about the ways that music, drama, and even mural arts helped to sustain their commitments to transforming the operation of privilege in their lives and in crossing borders of difference. The imagination is a powerful tool for dreaming about the self and about the world in new ways. The arts—drama, dance, music, painting, drawing, writing, etc.—and the

practices of worship, meditation, and prayer allow us to imagine new ways of being while at the same time providing a regenerative tool for releasing tension, pain, and discomfort. In addition, the arts allow us to communicate deep pains without using words that can be painful to utter. The sharing of creative works is also an important means of crossing borders where the artistic media acts as “interlocutor” allowing for encounters with new ideas, realities, and worlds.

Mentors and Allies to Provide Challenge, Accountability, Forgiveness

In ways that family members and loved ones cannot, mentors can offer challenge and support for the new people we are becoming. As Laura discovered in her Spanish professor, mentors can provide space for us to practice voice in new ways as we develop new identities, without the risk of reproach from family members and loved ones that is often a barrier to sustained change. Committed mentors, who have the specific purpose of supporting the transformation of privileged identities, can push and challenge, maintain accountability, provide space for confession, and offer compassionate forgiveness.

Vocational Discernment

In order to sustain our affective and spiritual well-being, our educational practices should include intentional vocational discernment—attending to God’s call as we shape our selves, our relationships, and our activities in the world. Vocational discernment should include intentional processes of discernment such as the Ignatian Examen, as well as discussion with mentors or allies about the shape our call is taking.

Taking Reflective Action

Engagement across lines of difference, critical study, reflection with mentors and allies, creative expression, and vocational discernment should eventuate in reflective action in the world. The action we take toward greater power sharing with those who are marginalized and oppressed serves to further socialize us into our new identities, and as our identities continue to develop, our reflection will deepen and our action take a deeper empathic quality. This action is not charity work, but rather engagement in coalition-building, activism, and concrete work toward dismantling privilege and oppression *alongside* those who experience domination. This should be sustained work, initiated and driven by those who are oppressed, with we as privileged border-crossers acting as partners, help-mates, and fellow sojourners.

Conclusion: A Vision for Pedagogy

This ongoing process of conversion—participating in a continuous cycle of critical thinking, vocational discernment, and reflective action immersed in encounters across lines of difference, with the support of challenging and forgiving mentors and allies—is done with the hopes of creating a third space of enunciation for a new kind of identity to emerge. While, at this point, we have only models of what this kind of identity could look like, and do not have tested educational models for facilitating border-crossing identities for people with privilege, the educational theorists around issues of privilege and conversion, the border-crossing authors we studied, and the border-crossers who shared their stories with us are important sources of vision and inspiration for the transformation to which we aspire.

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